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The Mystery of Mrs. Blencarrow. [A novel.]

Mrs Oliphant



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THE MYSTERY
OF
MRS. BLENCARROW

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT *HO*
AUTHOR OF 'THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,' 'HARRY JOSCELYN,'
'THE SON OF HIS FATHER,' 'SIR TOM,' ETC.

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THE MYSTERY OF MRS. BLENCARROW.



CHAPTER I.

THE BLENCARROW HOUSEHOLD.

THE house of Blencarrow, which, without being one of the great houses of the county, was as comfortable and handsome as a country gentleman not exactly of the highest importance could desire, stood in a pretty little park of its own, by the side of a bright little mountain river, either in Cumberland or Westmoreland or North Lancashire—for the boundaries of

these counties are to me somewhat confused, and I cannot aver where one ends and another begins. It was built, as is not unusual in North-country houses, on the slope of a hill, so that the principal rooms, which were on a level with the great entrance, were on the other side elevated by at least one lofty story from the flower-garden which surrounded the house. The windows of the drawing-room commanded thus a delightful view over a finely diversified country, ending in the far distance in a glimpse of water with a range of blue hills behind, which was one of the great lakes of that beautiful district. When sun or moon caught this distant lake, which it did periodically at certain times of the day and night, according to the season, it flashed suddenly into life, like one of those new signals of

science by which the sun himself is made to interpret between man and man. In the foreground the trees of the park clustered over the glimpses of the lively North-country river, which, sometimes shallow and showing all its pebbles, some times deepening into a pool, ran cheerfully by towards the lake. To the right, scarcely visible save when the trees were bare in winter, the red roofs of the little post-town, a mile and a half away, appeared in the distance with a pleasant sense of neighbourhood. But the scenery, after all, was not so interesting as the people inside.

They were, however, a very innocent, very simple, and unexciting group of country people. Mrs. Blencarrow had been a widow for five or six years, having lived there for some dozen years before,

the most beloved of wives. She was not a native of the district, but had come from the South, a beautiful girl, to whom her husband, who was a plain gentleman of simple character and manners, could never be sufficiently grateful for having married him. The ladies of the district thought this sentiment exaggerated, but everybody acknowledged that Mrs. Blencarrow made him an excellent wife. When he died he had left everything in her hands—the entire guardianship of the children, untrammelled by any joint authority save that of her own brothers, whose names were put in the will as a matter of form, and without any idea that they would ever take upon them to interfere. There were five children, the eldest of whom was a slim girl of sixteen, very gentle and quiet, and not very strong;

two boys of fourteen and twelve, at school; and two little ones, aged eight and nine respectively. They lived a very pleasant, well-cared-for, happy life. Mrs. Blencarrow's means, if not very large, were comfortable enough. The house was handsomely *montée*, the children had everything they could desire; the gloom of her first widowhood had been over for some time, and she 'saw her friends' like any other lady in the county, giving very pleasant dinner-parties, and even dances when the boys were at home for their holidays—dances, perhaps, all the more gay and easy because the children had a large share in them, and a gentle license prevailed—the freedom of innocence and extreme youth.

It is not to be supposed, when I say this, that anything which could in the

remotest degree be called 'fast' was in these assemblies. Indeed, the very word had not been invented in those days, and Mrs. Blencarrow was herself an impersonation of womanly dignity. The country-people were even a little afraid of her, if truth must be told. Without being stiff or prudish, there was a little air she had, at the faintest shade of impropriety, which scared an offender more than denunciation. She had a determined objection to scandal, even to gossip, and looked coldly upon flirtation, which was not then a recognised pastime as it is now. Nothing ever filled the neighbours with greater consternation than when a passing visitor from London, seeing Mrs. Blencarrow for the first time, declared that she was a woman who looked as if she had a history.

A history! When people say that,

they do not mean anything noble or saintly ; what it means is scandal, something that has been talked about. There was a general cry, which overwhelmed the unwary stranger. Mrs. Blencarrow a history ! Yes, the very best history a woman can have—the record of a blameless life.

‘ Nevertheless,’ said the unfortunate man, ‘ there is something in her eyes——’

‘ Oh yes, there is everything that is good in her eyes,’ said Lady Tremayne, who was young and enthusiastic, a sentiment in which most of the others agreed. At a later period, however, Mrs. Bircham, of The Leas, shook her head a little and said, ‘ Now that one thinks of it, there is something curious in Mrs. Blencarrow’s eyes.’

‘ They are very fine eyes, if that is what you mean.’

‘No ; that is not what I mean. She looks you too full in the face with them, as if she were defying you to find out anything wrong about her. Now, when there is nothing wrong to find out, a woman has no occasion to defy you.’

‘It must be a strange kind of wrong that has not been found out in eighteen years.’

‘Well, it might have happened before she was married—before she came here at all ; and when you know that there is something, however long the time may be, you never can forget it, don’t you know,’ said Mrs. Bircham, shaking her head.

‘You seem to speak from experience, my dear,’ said her husband.

‘No ; I don’t speak from experience,’ cried the lady, growing red ; ‘but I have seen a great many things in my time. I

have seen so many fine reputations collapse, and so many people pulled down from their pedestals.'

'And helped to do it, perhaps,' said Lady Tremayne. But she made the observation in an aside, for no one liked to encounter Mrs. Bircham's enmity and power of speech. She was one of those people who can develop a great matter from a small one, and smell out a piece of gossip at any distance ; and a seed of this description sown in her mind never died. She was not, as it happened, particularly happy in her surroundings. Though she was irreproachable herself, there was no lack of histories in the Bircham family, and Kitty, her second daughter, was one of the little flirts whose proceedings Mrs. Blencarrow so much disapproved. Mrs. Bircham was often

herself very angry with Kitty, but by a common maternal instinct could not endure to hear from another any echo of the same reproof which she administered freely.

Mrs. Blencarrow was, however, entirely unaware of this arrow shot into the air. She was still, though approaching forty, as handsome as at any period of her career, with all the additional charms of experience and understanding added to the still unbroken perfection of her features and figure. She was tall and pale, with large gray eyes, singularly clear and lustrous, which met every gaze with a full look, sometimes very imposing, and which always conveyed an impression of pride and reserve in the midst of their full and brave response to every questioning eye. Mrs. Bircham, who was not

without discrimination, had indeed made a very fair hit in her description of her neighbour's look. Sometimes those proud and steadfast eyes would be overbearing—haughty in their putting down of every impertinent glance. She had little colour habitually, but was subject to sudden flushes whenever her mind or feelings were affected, which wonderfully changed the character of her face, and came and went like the wind. She dressed always with a rich sobriety, in black or subdued colours—tones of violet and gray—never quite forgetting her widowhood, her friends thought, though always cheerful, as a woman with a family of children is bound for their sakes to be. She was an excellent woman of business, managing her estate with the aid of a sort of half-steward, half-agent, a young man brought

up by her husband and specially commended to her by his dying lips. People said, when they discussed Mrs. Blencarrow's affairs, as the affairs of women and widows are always discussed, that it would have been better for her to have had a more experienced and better instructed man as steward, who would have taken the work entirely off her hands—for young Brown was not at all a person of education; but her devotion to her husband's recommendation was such that she would hear of no change. And the young fellow on his side was so completely devoted to the family, so grateful for all that had been done for him, so absolutely trustworthy, that the wisest concluded on the whole that she was doing the best for her son's interests in keeping Brown, who lived in the house, but in

quite an humble way—one of the wisest points in Mrs. Blencarrow's treatment of him being that she never attempted to bring him out of his own sphere.

Besides Brown, her household included a governess, Miss Trimmer, who bore most appropriately that old-fashioned educational name; and an old housekeeper, who had been there in the time of Mrs. Blencarrow's mother-in-law, and who had seen her late master born—an old lady always in a brown silk dress, who conferred additional respectability on the household, and who was immensely considered and believed in. She came next to their mother in the affections of all the children. It was a very harmonious, well-ordered house, ringing with pleasant noise and nonsense when the boys came home, quiet at other times, though never

quite without the happy sound of children, save when the two little ones, Minnie and Jimmy, were out of the way. As for Emmy, the eldest, she was so quiet that scarcely any sound of her ever came into the house.

Such was the house of Blencarrow on a certain Christmas when the boys had come home as usual for their holidays. They came back in the highest spirits, determined that this should be the jolliest Christmas that ever was. The word 'jolly,' as applied to everything that is pleasant, had just come into use at school—I doubt even whether it had progressed into 'awfully jolly.' It sounded still very piquant in the ears of the youngsters, and still was reproved ('Don't be always using that dreadful word!') by mothers; the girls were still shy of using it at all. It

was Reginald who declared it to be the jolliest Christmas that ever had been. The weather was mild and open, good for hunting, and the boys had some excellent runs ; though all idea of frost and skating had to be given up. They were pleased with their own prowess and with everybody and everything round them, and prepared to act their part with grace and *bonhomie* — Reginald as master of the house, Bertie as his lieutenant and henchman—at the great ball which was to be given at Blencarrow on Christmas Eve.

The house was quite full for this great ceremonial. At Christmas the mixture of babes and grown-up young ladies and gentlemen is more easily made than at any other time of the year. The children mustered very strong. Those who were too far off to drive home that evening

were with their parents staying at Blencarrow, and every available corner was filled. The house was illuminated all over ; every passage and every sitting-room open to the bands of invaders—the little ones who played and the older ones who flirted—and the company was in the fullest tide of enjoyment, when the little incident occurred which I am about to record.

Mrs. Blencarrow had never looked better in her life. She wore a new gray velvet dress, long and sweeping, without any of the furbelows of the time, which would not have suited the heavy material nor her own admirable figure. It was open a little at the throat, with beautiful lace surrounding the fine warm whiteness. Her hair was worn higher than was usual at the time, in a fashion of her own, and

fastened with diamond stars. The children were very proud of their mother. She was like a lady out of a book, said Emmy, who was a romantic girl. Reginald felt himself more grand than words can say when he stood up beside her at the door to receive the guests. Her eyes were something like her diamonds — full of light ; and she met every glance more proudly than ever, with that direct look which some people thought so candid and open, and Mrs. Bircham believed to be a defiance to all the world to find out something that was not right. There was nothing, certainly, to find out in that open house, where every stranger might penetrate into every corner and welcome. Mrs. Blencarrow was a little pale, but now and then her countenance would be covered by one of those sudden flushes of

emotion which made her radiant. She put one hand on Reginald's shoulder with a proud gesture, as though he were supporting her as she stood at the door welcoming everybody ; and the boy drew himself up to his fullest height, trying to look twenty. He shook hands with everyone in the most anxious, hospitable way. Never was the part of master of the house more thoroughly played ; and thus, with every expectation of pleasure, the ball began.

CHAPTER II.

‘ IS IT YOU ?’

KITTY BIRCHAM had been a flirt almost from the time she could speak ; but even to a flirt Fate sometimes comes in the midst of her frivolity, as well as to the simplest girl. She had played with so many hearts without being the worse for it, that it was the greatest surprise to herself, as well as to her mother and interested friends, to find that at last this little witch was herself caught. I need not say that the man was the last person whom, in her sober senses, Kitty would have chosen, - or any of her family con-

sented to. Man ! He was not even a man, but a boy—only two or three years older than herself—a young fellow who had to go through one of those ordeals, quite new-fangled then — things which nobody understood—an examination for an appointment ; and who had nothing in the world but the prospect of that, a prospect daily becoming less probable since he and she had fallen in love with each other. They were neither of them of that high strain which is stimulated by love. They had not force of mind to think that every day which was spent in love-making, quarrelling and folly made it less easy for Walter Lawrence to work the next, or to work at all ; and that without work he was as little likely to pass his examination as to fly ; and that if he did not pass that examination they could not marry.

Both of these young fools knew all this perfectly well, but the knowledge made no difference in their behaviour. When he was not running after her by his own impulse, which was generally the case, Kitty used all her wiles to draw him away from his books, sending him notes, making appointments, inventing ways and means of meeting. His mother made appeals to him with tears in her eyes, and almost cursed the girl who was making her boy lose all his chances; and *her* mother made Kitty's life a burden, asking her how she intended to live, and whether she meant to support her husband by her needlework (at which everybody knew she was so clever!), by taking in washing, or by what?—since he neither had a penny nor would ever be able to make one for himself. This discipline on both

sides naturally threw these foolish young people more and more into each other's arms, and the domestic discomforts became so great that it at last became apparent to both that there was nothing for it but to run away.

'When we are married they will see that it is no use making a fuss,' Walter said to Kitty. 'They will acknowledge that once it is done it can't be undone.'

'And they *must* lay their heads together and get you a post, or give us something to live on,' said Kitty to Walter.

'They will never let us starve,' said he 'after.'

'And they will never give us any peace,' said she, 'before.'

So that they were in perfect accord so far as the theory went. But they hesitated to take that tremendous step ; thei

minds were made up, and it was a delicious subject of conversation during the hours which they daily spent together ; but neither of them as yet had quite screwed up courage to the sticking-point.

This was the state of affairs on the evening of the Blencarrow ball. It had happened to both to be unusually tried during that day. Kitty had been scolded by her mother till she did not know, as she said, ' whether she was standing on her head or her heels.' Her uncle, who had come from a distant part of the country for Christmas, had been invited to remonstrate with her on her folly. Papa had not said anything, but he had been so snappish that she had not known what to do to please him—papa, who usually stood by her under all circumstances. And Uncle John ! Kitty felt

that she could not bear such another day. Walter, on his side, had again had a scene with his mother, who had threatened to speak to her trustees, that they might speak to Walter to show him his duty, since he would not listen to her.

It was some time before this suffering pair could get within reach of each other to pour out their several complaints. Kitty had first to dance with half a dozen uninteresting people, and to be brought back demurely to Mrs. Bircham's side at the end of every tedious dance ; and Walter had to ask a corresponding number of young ladies before a happy chance brought them together out of sight of Mrs. Bircham and Mrs. Lawrence, who were both watching with the most anxious eyes. Kitty could not even lose time dancing when they had thus met.

‘Oh, I have a dozen things to tell you!’ she said; ‘I must tell you, or I shall die.’

They went into the conservatory, but there were some people there, and into room after room, without finding a solitary corner. It was in the hall that the dance was going on. The servants were preparing the supper-table in the dining-room. The library was being used by the elder people (horrid elder people, always getting in one’s way, who had no feeling at all!) for their horrid cards. The morning-room was given up to tea. People, *i.e.*, other young pairs, were seated on the stairs and in every available corner.

‘Oh, come down here; there is nobody here,’ said Kitty, drawing her lover to the staircase at the end of a long passage

which led down to the lower part of the house.

Both of them knew the house thoroughly, as country neighbours do. They had been all over it when they were children, and knew the way down into the flower-garden, and even the private door at the back, by which tenants and petitioners were admitted to Mrs. Blencarrow's business-room. The lights were dim in these deserted regions ; there was perfect silence and quiet—no other couples to push against, no spying servants nor reproachful seniors. The young pair hurried down the long stairs, feeling the cold of the empty passage grateful and pleasant.

‘The old dining-room is the nicest place,’ said Kitty, leading the way. This room was in the front of the house under the drawing-room, and looked out upon

the lawn and flower-beds. It was part of the older house, which had served all the purposes of the Blencarrows in the days when people had not so many wants as now. There was no light in it except a faint glimmer from the fire. The shutters had not been closed, and the moon looked in through the branches of the leafless trees. The two lovers went in with a rush and sat down with quiet satisfaction upon a sofa just within the door.

‘Nobody will disturb us here,’ whispered Kitty with a sigh of satisfaction. ‘We can stay as long as we like here.’

They were both out of breath from their rush; and to find themselves alone in the dark, and in a place where they had no right to be, was delightful. They sat quiet for a moment, leaning against

each other recovering their breath, and then there happened something which, notwithstanding Kitty's intense preoccupation with her own affairs, gave her such a prick of still more vivid curiosity as roused every sense and faculty in her. She became all ear and all observation in a moment. There was a soft sound as of a door opening on the other side of the room—the side that was in the shade—and then after a moment a voice asked, 'Is it you?'

Walter (the idiot) suppressed with pain a giggle, and only suppressed it because Kitty flung herself upon him, putting one hand upon his mouth and clutching his coat with the other to keep him quiet. She held her breath and became noiseless as a mouse—as a kitten in the moment before a spring. The voice was a man's

voice, with something threatening in its tone.

‘How long do you think this is going to last?’ he said.

Oh, what a foolish thing a boy is! Walter shook with laughter, while she listened as if for life and death.

Then there was a pause. Again the voice asked anxiously, ‘Is it you?’—another pause, and then the soft closing of the door more cautiously than it had been opened.

Walter rose up from the sofa as soon as the door was shut. ‘I must get my laugh out,’ he whispered, sweeping Kitty out into the passage. Oh, that foolish, foolish boy! As if it were a laughing matter! A man, a stranger, asking somebody how long ‘this’ was to last! How long what was to last? And who could he be?

‘Oh, Wat, you might have stayed a moment!’ Kitty said, exasperated; ‘you might have kept quiet! Perhaps he would have said something more. Who could he be?’

‘It is no business of ours,’ said Walter; ‘one of the servants, I suppose. Let’s go upstairs again, Kitty. We have no business here.’

‘Oh, don’t be so silly,’ cried Kitty; ‘we must find a quiet place, for I’ve scores of things to tell you. There is a room at the other end with a light in it. Let us go there.’

Their footsteps sounded upon the stone passage, and Kitty’s dress rustled—there could be no eavesdropping possible there. She went on a step in front of him and pushed open a door which was ajar; then Kitty gave a little shriek and fell back,

but too late. Mrs. Blencarrow, in all her splendour for the ball, was standing before the fire. It was a plainly-furnished room, with a large writing-table in it, and shelves containing account books and papers—the business-room, where nobody except the tenants and the workpeople ever came in. To see her standing there, with all her diamonds flashing in the dimness, was the strangest sight.

‘Who is there?’ she cried, with an angry voice; then, ‘Kitty! What are you doing here?’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Blencarrow. We did not know what room it was. We couldn’t find a cool place. Indeed,’ said Kitty, recovering her courage, ‘we couldn’t find a place at all, there is such a crowd—and we thought the house was all open to-night, and that we might come downstairs.’

Mrs. Blencarrow looked at them both with the fullest straight look of those eyes, whose candour was sometimes thought to mean defiance. 'I think,' she said, 'that though the house is all open to-night, Walter and you should not make yourselves remarkable by stealing away together. I ought, perhaps, to tell your mother.'

'Oh, don't, Mrs. Blencarrow !'

'It is very foolish of you both.'

'It was my fault, Mrs. Blencarrow. Don't let Kitty be blamed. I remembered the old way into the garden.'

'I hope you did not intend to go into the garden this cold night. Run upstairs at once, you foolish children !' She hesitated a moment, and then said, with one of her sudden blushes dyeing her countenance : 'I have got a bad headache ; the

music is a little too loud. I came down here for a moment's quiet, and to get some eau de Cologne.'

'Dear Mrs. Blencarrow,' cried Kitty, too much unnerved for the moment to make any comments upon the lady's look or manner, 'don't please say anything to mamma.'

Mrs. Blencarrow shook her head at them, looking from one to another, which meant gentle reproof of their foolishness, but then nodded an assent to Kitty's prayer. But she pointed to the door at the same time, rather impatiently, as if she wanted to be rid of them; and, glad to escape so easily, they hastened away. Kitty felt the relief of having escaped so strongly that she never even asked herself why Mrs. Blencarrow should come down to the business-room in the

middle of a ball, or if that was a likely place to find eau de Cologne. She thought of nothing (for the moment) but that she had got off rather well from what might have been an embarrassing situation.

‘I don’t think she’ll tell on us,’ Kitty said, with a long-drawn breath.

‘I am sure she will not,’ said Walter, as they ran up the long stone flight of stairs, and came back to the sound of music and dancing.

Mrs. Bircham had just broken the monotony of a chaperon’s vigil by taking a cup of tea. She was issuing forth from the door of the tea-room upon the arm of one of those portly old gentlemen who are there for the purpose, when Kitty, breathless with haste, pushing Walter along in front of her, suddenly came within her mother’s view.

That mother's side Kitty did not again leave, save for the brief limits of a dance, all the evening. She read in the glance with which she was regarded from time to time the lecture that was in store for her. Indeed, she knew it all by heart; there was no novelty in it for Kitty. She gave Walter a despairing look as he passed her by, and they had time for a moment's whisper as to the spot where they must meet to-morrow; for all that she had intended to confide to him lay still in Kitty's heart unrevealed, and she began to feel that affairs had come to a crisis which demanded action at last.

CHAPTER III.

AN ELOPEMENT.

THE ball was the most brilliant and the most successful that ever had been at Blencarrow, and nothing was wanting to make it intoxicating and delightful to the boys, whose every whim had been thought of and all their partialities taken into account. Mrs. Blencarrow was perfect as a mother. She gave the young heir his place without showing any partiality, or making Bertie one whit less the beloved and favoured son of the house ; and no one could say that she spoilt either of them, though she considered their every

wish. They were as obedient and respectful as if they had been held within the severest discipline, and yet how they were indulged !

When everybody was preparing to go in to supper, Mrs. Blencarrow called Reginald to her in sight of all the crowd. She said to him, ‘I think you may go and fetch your friend Brown to supper, Rex. He will like to come to supper ; but I am sure he will be too shy unless you go and fetch him.’

‘ Oh, may I, mamma ? ’ said the boy .

He was enchanted with the commission. Brown was the young steward—Mrs. Blencarrow’s chief assistant in the management of the estate—the young fellow whom her husband recommended to her on his death-bed. The group which gathered round Mrs. Blen-

carrow, ready for the procession in to supper, thought this was the most charming way of acknowledging the claims of Brown. To have brought him to the dance would have been out of place; he would have felt himself out of it. He could not have ventured to ask anybody to dance, and to look on while you are young is dull work. But to ask him to supper was just the right compromise. The old gentlemen promised to themselves that they would notice Brown; they would ask him to drink a glass of wine (which was the custom then); they would show him that they approved of a young man who did such excellent work and knew his place so well.

It must be allowed that when he came, triumphantly led by Reginald, with Bertie dancing in front of him ('Oh,

come along, Brown ; mamma says you're to come to supper. Come along, Brown ; here is a place for you'), his looks did not conciliate these country gentlemen. He was a handsome young man in a rather rough way, with that look of watchful suspicion so often to be seen on the face of a man who is afraid of being condescended to by his superiors. He was in a sort of evening dress, as if he had been prepared for the invitation, with a doubtful coat of which it was difficult to say whether it was a morning coat of peculiar cut, or an old-fashioned one for evening use. He yielded unwillingly, it seemed, to the encouragements of the boys, and he was placed far down at the other end of the table, among the children and the youngest of the grown-up party, where he was totally out of place. Had

he been near the other end, where the honest country gentlemen were, quite prepared to notice and take wine with him, Brown would have been more at his ease. He cast one glance at his mistress as he passed, a look which was gloomy, reproachful, almost defiant. Scotch peasant faces get that look sometimes without any bad meaning, and Cumberland faces are very like the Scotch. He was no doubt upbraiding her for having forced him to appear at all.

At last it was all over, the last carriage rolling away, the last sleepy group of visitors sent to bed. Mrs. Blencarrow stood on her own hearth, leaning her head on the marble mantelpiece, looking down into the fire. She had been very gay to the last, smiling upon her guests ; but her face when in perfect repose, and in the

case of solitude, no one near to spy upon it, was very different. Anxiety and trouble came into every line of her fine pale features. She changed her attitude after awhile, and looked straight into the darkness of the great mirror, behind the clock and the candelabra which stood in front of it. She looked into her own face with a determined, steady look, her eyes opened widely. She seemed to ask herself what she should do, but shook her head afterwards with a vague, sad smile. The mirror repeated all these changes of countenance, but gave no counsel. Someone came into the room at this moment, which made her start. It was one of the ladies staying in the house, who had forgotten something, and come back to fetch it.

‘Not gone to bed yet?’ she said.

‘No,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow; ‘after a business of this kind, however tired I may be, I don’t sleep.’

‘I know what you are doing,’ said her friend. ‘You are asking yourself, now that it’s all over, “What’s the good?”’

‘No; I don’t think so,’ she said quickly; then changed her look and said, ‘Perhaps I was.’

‘Oh, I am sure you were! and it is no good except for such pleasure as you get out of it.’

‘Pleasure!’ said Mrs. Blencarrow. ‘But the boys liked it,’ she said.

‘Oh, the boys! They were more happy than words could say. I think you measure everything by the boys.’

‘Not everything,’ she said with a sigh; and, taking up her candle, she followed her friend upstairs.

The house had fallen into perfect quiet. There was not a sound in all the upper part ; a drowsy stillness was in the broad staircase, still dimly lighted, and the corridor above ; only a distant echo from below, from the regions which were half underground—a muffled sound of laughter and voices—showed that the servants were still carrying on the festivity. Mrs. Blencarrow said good-night at the door of her friend's room, and went on to her own, which was at the further end of the long gallery. She left her candle upon a small table outside, where it burned on, a strange, lonely little twinkle of light in the darkness, for half the wintry night.

Neither Kitty nor Walter could rest next day until they had eluded the vigilance of their several guardians and escaped to their usual meeting - place,

where they poured into each other's ears the dire experiences of the previous night. Kitty had been badly scolded before, but it had been as nothing in comparison with what she had suffered on the way home and after her return. Mamma had been terrible; she had outdone herself; there had been nothing too dreadful for her to say. And papa had not stood by Kitty—the best that could be said for him was that he had taken no active part in the demolition of all her hopes.

‘For I am to be sent away to-morrow to my aunt's in Gloucestershire—fancy in Gloucestershire!’ as if there was something specially diabolical in that county.

‘You shall not be sent away; the time has come for us to take it into our own hands,’ said Walter soberly, with a strain of resolution.

He had to tell her of not unsimilar barbarities on his side. His mother had written to her trustees. She expected Mr. Wadsett from Edinburgh, who was also her man of business (for her property was in Scotland), next day.

‘To-morrow is the crisis for both of us ; we must simply take it into our own hands and forestall them,’ said Walter. ‘I knew that one day it would come to this. If they force it on us it is their own doing,’ he said, with a look of determination enough to make any trustee tremble.

‘Oh, Walter!’ cried Kitty, rubbing her head against his shoulder like the kitten she was.

His resolute air gave her a thrill of frightened delight. Usually she was the first person in all their conjoint movements ; to be carried along now, and feel

it was not her doing, but his, was a new, ecstatic, alarming sensation, which words could not express.

They then began to consider without more ado (both feeling themselves elevated by the greatness of the crisis) what was to be done. Kitty had fondly hoped for a postchaise, which was the recognised way of romance ; but Walter pointed out that on the railway—still a new thing in that district—there was an early train going to Edinburgh, which they could enter far more easily and with less fear of being arrested than a postchaise, and which would waft them to Gretna Green in less time than it would take to go ten miles in a carriage. Gretna Green was still the right place to which lovers flew ; it was one of the nearest points in Scotland, where marriage was so easy, where

the two parties to the union were the only ones concerned.

Kitty was slow to give up the postchaise, but she yielded to Walter's argument. The train passed very early, so that it would be necessary for her to start out of the house in the middle of the night, as it were, to join her lover, who would be waiting for her; and then a walk of a mile or two would bring them to the station—and then! Their foolish hearts beat high while they made all the arrangements. Kitty shivered at the idea of the long walk in the chill dark morning. She would have so much preferred the sweep of the postchaise, the probable rush in pursuit, the second postchaise rattling after them, probably only gaining the goal ten minutes too late. She had imagined that rush many

a time, and how she might see her father or brother's head looking out from the window, hurrying on the postilion, but just too late to stop the hasty ceremony. The railway would change it all, and would be much less triumphant and satisfactory ; but still, if Walter said so, it must be done, and her practical imagination saw the conveniences as well as the drawbacks.

Walter walked back with Kitty as near as he dared to The Leas, and then Kitty walked back again with him. They thus made a long afternoon's occupation of it, during which everything was discussed and over again discussed, and in which all the responsibility was laid on the proper shoulders, *i.e.*, on those of the parents who had driven them to this only alternative. Neither of them

had any doubt as to the certainty of this, and they had at the same time fair hopes of being received back again when it was all over, and nothing could be done to mend it. After this, their people must acknowledge that it was no manner of use struggling, and that it behoved them to think of making some provision for the young pair, who after all were their own flesh and blood.

Kitty did not undress at all, considering the unearthly hour at which she was to set out. She flung off her evening dress into a corner, reflecting that though it must be prepared after, instead of before, her marriage, she must have a trousseau all the same, and that no bride puts on again her old things after that event. Kitty put on her new winter dress, which was very becoming, and had a pretty hat

to match it, and lay down to snatch an hour or two's rest before the hour of starting. She woke reluctantly to the sound of a handful of pebbles thrown against her window, and then, though still exceedingly sleepy and greatly tempted to pay no attention to the summons, managed at last to rouse herself, and sprang up with a thump of her heart when she recollected what it was—her wedding morning ! She lighted a candle and put on her hat, studying the effect in the glass, though she knew that Walter was blowing his fingers with cold below ; and then, with a fur cloak over her arm, she stole downstairs. How dark it was, and how cold ! The country black with night, nothing visible but the waving, close to the house, of some spectral trees. But Walter pulled her hand through his arm the moment

she slipped out, and her spirits rose. Two can face the darkness where one would shrink before it. They had the strangest, merriest walk—stumbling in the maddest way, jolting over stiles, going astray into ploughed fields, rousing all the dogs in all the farms and cottages for miles round—but at last found their way, worn out with stumbling and laughing, to the station, where the train had not yet arrived. And then came the rush and sweep through the night, the arrival in the gray morning at the station, the rousing up of the grim priest known as ‘the blacksmith’—though I am not sure that this was his trade. Kitty found time to smarten herself up a little, to straighten the brim of her hat and put it on as if she had taken it fresh out of its bandbox, and to put on her white gloves—the only things truly bride-like,

which she had put in her pocket before she left home—and then the ceremony, whatever it was, was performed, and the boy and girl were made man and wife.

After it was all over, Kitty and Walter looked at each other in the gray morning light with a pale and frightened look. When the thing was done the excitement suddenly failed, and for a moment everything was black. Kitty cried a little, and Walter, if it had not been for his pride of manhood, was very near following her example. What awful thing was it they had done? Kitty was the first to recover her courage.

‘I am dreadfully hungry,’ she said, ‘and so tired. Walter, do go and see if we can have some breakfast anywhere. I must have some breakfast, or I shall die.’ Kitty was very fond of this alternative,

but had shown no intention of adopting it as yet.

‘I’ll go on to that public-house over there ; but won’t you come too, Kitty?’

‘No ; go and order breakfast, and then come and fetch me. I’ll look over the books and see who have gone before us,’ said Kitty.

He left her seated, half leaning over the table, studying the records which she had spread out before her. At that moment Kitty had a great sympathy for everybody who had been married, and a wondering desire to know what they had felt.

CHAPTER IV.

A DISCOVERY.

WHEN Walter came back, having ordered a meal such as was most easily procurable in those regions, that is to say, tea and stale bread and fresh oatcakes and a dish of ham and eggs, he found Kitty waiting for him in a fever of impatience. She had one of the blacksmith's big register-books opened out upon the table, and her eyes were dancing with excitement. She rushed to meet him and caught him by the arm.

‘Wat!’ she said, ‘oh, how soon can we get back?’

‘Get back!’ he cried; ‘but we are not going back.’

‘Oh yes, but we are, as quick as we can fly. Go and order the horses this minute—oh, I forgot, it’s a train! Can’t we have a train directly? When is there a train?’

‘For goodness’ sake, Kitty, what do you mean? But we are married! You can’t be going to turn your back upon me.’

‘Oh, fiddlesticks!’ said Kitty, in her excitement; ‘who talks of turning their back? I’ve found out something that will make mamma jump; it makes me jump to begin with!’ exclaimed the girl, performing a dance on the floor. ‘They’ll never say a word to us. They’ll be struck dumb with this. Look! look!’

Walter looked with great surprise, without the slightest conception of what it

could be to which his attention was called. His eyes wandered along the page, seeing nothing. A long array of names: what could there be in these to call for all this commotion? Kitty pushed him aside in her excitement. She laid her finger upon one short signature written very small. He read it, and turned and looked at her aghast.

‘Kitty! what do you mean? Who is it? It can’t—it can’t be——’

‘Well!’ cried Kitty, ‘and who could it be? “Joan Blencarrow”—there’s only one person of that name in all the world.’

‘Good heavens!’ Walter cried. He had more feeling than she had, for he stood aghast. Mrs. Blencarrow! He seemed to see her suddenly in all her dignity and splendour, as he had seen her

standing receiving her guests. Kitty jumped with excitement, but Walter was appalled.

‘Mrs. Blencarrow ! I can’t believe it ! I don’t believe it !’ he said.

‘What does it matter whether you believe it or not, for there it is?’ said Kitty, triumphant. ‘Oh, what a state mamma will be in ! She will never say a word to us. She will pay no attention, any more than if we had been out for a walk. Oh, how she will like to pull down Mrs. Blencarrow !—she that was always so grand, and people thinking there was nobody like her. And all this time—three years——’

Kitty’s eyes danced with delight. To think that she should be the one to find out such a wonderful secret intoxicated her with satisfaction and pleasure.

‘Kitty,’ said Walter, with hesitation, ‘we have found it out by accident.’

‘Oh, don’t say *we*! *I’ve* found it out. It would never have come into your head to look at the books.’

‘Well, *you* then. You have found it out by accident, and when we’re happy ourselves, why should we try to make other people miserable? Kitty!’ He put his arm round her, and pleaded with his lips close to her ear.

‘Oh, nonsense!’ she said; ‘all men are taken in like that; but I can’t let her off; I won’t let her off. Why, it wouldn’t be right!’

‘There are some people who would think what we are doing wasn’t right,’ said Walter.

‘Oh, you coward,’ cried Kitty, ‘to turn round on me when we haven’t

been married an hour ! As if it was my doing, when you know that but for you——’

‘I am not turning round on you. I never said it was your doing. Kitty, darling, don’t let us quarrel. You know I never meant——’

‘I shall quarrel, if I like,’ cried Kitty, bursting into tears ; and they had it out, as they had already done a hundred times, and would a hundred more, enjoying it thoroughly. It suddenly occurred to Walter, however, as the little episode drew near a close, that the ham and eggs must be ready, and he threw in an intimation to this effect with very telling results. Kitty jumped up, dried her eyes, straightened her hat, and declared that she was dying of hunger.

‘But whatever happens, and however

serious things may be, you always will go on,' she said.

He was magnanimous, being very hungry too, and restrained the retort that was trembling on his tongue, that it was she who would go on ; and they flew across to the little alehouse, arm in arm, and enjoyed their ham and eggs even more than they had enjoyed their quarrel.

They found out that the next train 'up' was not till eleven o'clock, which set their minds at rest, for they had meant to go to London before Kitty's mind had been all unsettled by that discovery. Walter had begun to hope she had forgotten all about it, when she suddenly jumped up from the table—not, however, before she had made a very satisfactory meal.

‘ Oh, what a fool I am !’ cried Kitty.
‘ I never paid any attention to the man !’

‘ What man ?’

‘ Why, the man she was married to, you goose ! A woman can’t be married all by herself. It was a long name—Everard something. I didn’t know it, or I should have paid more attention. Haven’t you finished yet ?—for I must run this instant——’

‘ Where, Kitty ?’

‘ Why, to look up the book again !’ she cried.

‘ I wish you’d give this up,’ said Walter.
‘ Do, to please me. We’ve got all we wish ourselves, and why should we worry other people, Kitty ?’

‘ If you have got all you wish, I have not. I want to please them—to make

them do something for us ; and when a thing like this turns up—the very thing ! —why, mamma will hug us both—she will forgive us on the spot. She'll be so pleased she'll do anything for us. I don't know about Mrs. Lawrence——'

'It won't do us any good with my mother,' said Walter, with a thrill of dread coming over him, for he did not like to think of his mother and that terrible trustee.

'By the way,' cried Kitty, with a pirouette of delight, 'it's I that am Mrs. Lawrence now, and she's only the Dowager. Fancy turning a person who has always made you shake in your shoes into the Dowager ! It's too delightful—it's worth all the rest.'

Walter did not like this to be said about his mother. He had deceived and dis-

appointed her, but he was not without a feeling for her.

‘That is all nonsense,’ he said. ‘It is not as if I had come into the property and my mother had to turn out; for everything is hers. I hope you don’t mind being Mrs. Walter, Kitty, for my sake.’

Kitty considered a moment whether she should be angry, but concluded that it was too soon after the last quarrel, and would be monotonous and a bore, so she caught up his hat instead and thrust it into his hand.

‘Come along,’ she said; ‘come along. We have sat a long time over breakfast, and there is no time to lose; I must make out the other name in that book.’

But here the young lady met with an unexpected check, for the blacksmith stopped them as they entered his house,

striding towards them from the kitchen, where he, too, had finished a very satisfactory meal.

‘What will ye be wanting?’ he said. ‘Ye will maybe think I can unmarry ye again? but it’s not possible to do that.’

‘We don’t want to be unmarried,’ said Kitty; ‘we want just to look at the book again, to see a name.’

‘What book?’

‘The register-book that is in that room,’ said Walter; ‘my wife,’ and he gave Kitty’s arm a squeeze, ‘saw a name——’

‘My book!’ The blacksmith stood in the doorway like a mountain, not to be passed by or pushed aside. ‘I’ll have no one spying into the names in my book.’

‘I don’t want to spy,’ said Kitty; ‘it’s somebody I know.’

But the big man would hear no reason; he looked at the little couple before him, so young and so silly, as if he had been a bishop at least.

‘I couldn’t refuse to marry ye,’ he said; ‘I hadn’t the right. But if I had followed my own lights, I would just have sent ye home to your parents to be put back in the nursery; and ye shall see no books of mine, nor tell tales upon other folk.’

And nothing could move him from this resolution. Kitty nearly cried with vexation when they got into the train again; her own escapade dwindled into something quite secondary.

‘It was so silly of me not to make sure of the name. I am sure the first name was Everard, or something like that. And what a brute that man is, Walter! If

you had really loved me as you say, you would have pushed him away or knocked him down.'

'Why, he was six times as big as me, Kitty!'

'What does that matter,' she said, 'when it's for the sake of someone you love?'

But perhaps this is rather a feminine view.

There had been, as may be supposed, a great commotion in The Leas when it was found that Kitty's room was vacant in the morning. A girl's absence is more easily discovered than a boy's. Mrs. Lawrence thought that Walter had gone off for the day to see some of his friends, and would come back to dinner, as he had done many times before; and though she was angry with him for leaving his work,

she was not anxious. But a young lady does not make escapades of this sort; and when it was discovered that Kitty's best things had disappeared, and her favourite locket, and that she had evidently never gone to bed in a proper and legitimate way, the house and the neighbourhood was roused. Mrs. Bircham sent off messengers far and near; and Mr. Bircham himself, though an easy-minded man, went out on the same errand, visiting, among other places, Blencarrow, where all the gaiety of a Christmas party was still going on, and the boys were trying with delight the first faint film of ice upon the pond to see when it would be likely to bear. Then, after a hasty but late luncheon, he had gone to see whether Mrs. Lawrence knew anything about the fugitive; and Mrs. Bircham, at her wits'

end, and not knowing what to do, was alone in the drawing-room at The Leas, pondering everything, wishing she had Kitty there to shake her, longing to pour forth floods of wrath ; but at the same time chilled by that dread of something having happened which will come in even when a mother is most enraged. She was saying to herself that nothing could have happened — that it must be that young Lawrence — that the girl was an idiot — that she washed her hands of her — that she would have nothing to do with them — that, oh, if she had only thought to lock her up in her bedroom and stop it all!

‘ Oh, Kitty, Kitty ! where are you, child ? ’ she cried nervously at the conclusion of all.

There was a rustle and a little rush,

and Kitty ran in, flinging herself upon her knees upon the hearthrug, and replied:

‘ Here I am—here I am, mamma !’

Mrs. Bircham uttered a shriek. She saw Walter behind, and the situation in a moment became clear to her.

‘ You young fools !’ she said ; ‘ you disobedient, ungrateful children—you——’

‘ Oh, mamma, one moment. We have been to Gretna Green — Walter and me !’

‘ How dared you, sir ?’ said Mrs. Bircham, turning upon the hapless lover — ‘ how dared you steal my innocent child away ? And then you come here to triumph over us. Begone, sir—begone, sir, out of my house ; begone out of my house !’

Kitty jumped up off her knees and caught Walter by the arm.

‘He does not go a step without me,’ she cried. ‘But, mamma, if you would have a moment’s patience, you would not think any more about it. We were going to London ; but I came back, though I knew you would scold, to tell you. Listen to me one moment,’ cried Kitty, running all the words into one ; ‘it’s something about Mrs. Blencarrow.’

Mrs. Bircham had her hands raised, presumably to draw down the curse of heaven upon the pair, but at this name she paused ; her countenance changed.

‘Mrs. Blencarrow?’ she gasped, and could say no more.

‘You never heard such a thing in your life!’ cried Kitty. She dropped Walter’s arm, and came forward in front of him. ‘Mamma, I saw her name in the register ; there it is—anyone can see it : Joan

Blencarrow—there couldn't be another person with such a name.'

'In the register? What—what do you mean?'

'Mamma, I mean that Mrs. Blencarrow is married—to somebody else. She's been married these three years. I read her name this very day. It's in the register at Gretna Green.'

Mrs. Bircham staggered back a few steps and dropped into a chair.

'Married!' she cried. 'Mrs. Blencarrow married!'

'Three years ago,' cried Kitty glibly. 'Fifth January—I saw the date—three years ago!'

Mrs. Bircham sat with her hands clasped and her eyes glaring, 'as if,' Kitty said afterwards, 'they would come out of her head.' She uttered a succes-

sion of cries, from little shrieks to breathless exclamations. ‘ Married ! — Mrs. Blencarrow ! Oh, oh, Kitty ! Oh, good heavens ! — Mrs. Blencarrow ! Three years ago — the time she went off to Scotland to see her sister. Oh, oh, Kitty ! In the register ! Get me a glass of water, or I think I shall die.’

Walter disappeared for the water, thinking that after all his mother-in-law was a good-hearted woman, and didn’t feel as Kitty said she would ; but when he returned, his admiration of Mrs. Bircham turned into admiration for his wife, for Kitty and her mother, sitting close as if they were the dearest friends, were laying their heads together and talking both at the same time ; and the horror and amazement in Mrs. Bircham’s face had given way to the dancing of a malicious light in

her eyes, and a thrill of eagerness all over her.

‘I am not at all surprised,’ she was saying when Walter came in. ‘I felt sure something of the kind would come to light sooner or later. I never would have trusted her—not a step beyond what I saw. I felt sure all wasn’t right in that house. What a mercy, Kitty, that you saw it!’

‘Wasn’t it a mercy, mamma!’

Kitty gave her young husband a look aside; she had made her peace with her news. But Mrs. Bircham thought of nothing—neither of her daughter’s escape, nor her own just anger — of nothing but this wonderful news, and what would be the best thing to do.

CHAPTER V.

‘ARE WE QUITE ALONE?’

MRS. BLENCARROW had just been saying good-bye to a number of her guests, and, what was of more importance, her boys had just left her upon a visit to one of their uncles who lived in a Midland county, and who, if the weather was open (and there had been a great thaw that morning), could give them better entertainment than could be provided in a feminine house. There was a look in her face as if she were almost glad to see them drive away. She was at the hall-door to see them go, and stood kissing

her hand to them as they drove off shouting their good-byes, Reginald with the reins, and Bertie with his curly head uncovered, waving his cap to his mother. She watched them till they disappeared among the trees, with a smile of pride and pleasure on her face, and then there came a dead dulness over it, like a landscape on which the sun had suddenly gone down.

‘Emmy, you should not stand here in the cold,’ she said; ‘run upstairs, my dear, to a warm room.’

‘And what are you going to do, mamma?’

‘I have some business to look after,’ Mrs. Blencarrow said. She went along the stone passage and down the stairs where Kitty and Walter had gone on the night of the ball. She had a weary look,

and her footsteps, usually so elastic, dragged a little. The business-room was as cheerful as a large fire could make it ; she opened the door with an anxious look in her eyes, but drew a breath of relief when she saw that no one was there. On the mantelpiece was a note in a large bold handwriting : ‘ Out on the farm, back at five,’ it said. Mrs. Blencarrow sat down in the arm-chair in front of her writing-table. She leant her head in her hands, covering her face, and so remained for a long time, doing nothing, not even moving, as if she had been a figure in stone. When she stirred at last and uncovered her face, it was almost as white as marble. She drew a long sigh from the very depths of her being. ‘ I wonder how long this can go on,’ she said, wringing her hands, speaking to herself.

These were the same words which Kitty and Walter had overheard in the dark, but not from her. There were, then, two people in the house to whom there existed something intolerable which it was wellnigh impossible to bear.

She drew some papers towards her and began to look over them listlessly, but it was clear that there was very little interest in them ; then she opened a drawer and took out some letters, which she arranged in succession and tried to fix her attention to, but neither did these succeed. She rose up, pushing them impatiently away, and began to pace up and down the room, pausing mechanically now and then to look at the note on the mantelpiece and to look at her watch, both of which things she did twice over in five minutes. At five ! It was not

four yet—what need to linger here when there was still an hour—still a whole hour? Mrs. Blencarrow was interrupted by a knock at her door; she started as if it had been a cannon fired at her ear, and instinctively cast a glance at the glass over the mantelpiece to smooth the agitation from her face before she replied. The servant had come to announce a visitor — Mrs. Bircham — awaiting his mistress in the drawing-room. ‘Ah! she has come to tell me about Kitty,’ Mrs. Blencarrow said to herself.

She went upstairs wearily enough, thinking that she had no need to be told what had become of Kitty, that she knew well enough what must have happened, but sorry, too, for the mother, and ready to say all that she could to console her—to put forth the best pleas she could for the

foolish young pair. She was so full of trouble and perplexity herself, which had to be kept in rigorous concealment, that anything of which people could speak freely, upon which they could take others into their confidence, seemed light and easy to her. She went upstairs without a suspicion or alarm—wearied, but calm.

Mrs. Bircham did not meet her with any appeal for sympathy either in look or words ; there was no anxiety in her face. Her eyes were full of satisfaction and malice, and ill-concealed but pleasurable excitement.

‘I can see,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow, ‘that you have news of Kitty,’ as she shook hands with her guest.

‘Oh, Kitty is right enough,’ said the other hastily ; and then she cast a glance round the room. ‘Are we quite alone?’

she asked ; ‘ there are so many corners in this room, one never knows who may be listening. Mrs. Blencarrow, I do not come to speak of Kitty, but about yourself.’

‘ About myself?’

‘ Oh,’ said Mrs. Bircham, with a gasp, ‘ you speak in that innocent tone as if it was quite surprising that anyone could have anything to say of you.’

Mrs. Blencarrow changed her position so as to get her back to the light ; one of those overwhelming flushes which were habitual to her had come scorching over her face.

‘ No more surprising to me than—to any of us,’ she said, with an attempt at a smile. ‘ What is it that I have done?’

‘ Oh, Mrs. Blencarrow—though why I

should go on calling you Mrs. Blencarrow when that's not your name——'

'Not my name!' There was a shrill sort of quaver in her voice, a keen note as of astonishment and dismay.

'I wish,' cried Mrs. Bircham, growing red, and fanning herself with her muff in her excitement—'I wish you wouldn't go on repeating what I say ; it's maddening—and always as if you didn't know. Why don't you call yourself by your proper name? How can you go on deceiving everybody, and even your own poor children, living on false pretences, "lying all round," as my husband says? Oh, I know you've been doing it for years ; you've got accustomed to it, I suppose ; but don't you know how disgraceful it is, and what everybody will say?'

Had there been any critic of human

nature present, it would have gone greatly against Mrs. Blencarrow that she was not astonished at this attack. She rose up with a fine gesture of pride.

‘This is an extraordinary assault to make upon me,’ she said, ‘in my own house.’

‘Is it your own house, after disgracing it so?’ cried the visitor. And then she added, after an angry pause for breath : ‘I came out of kindness, to let you know that everything was discovered. Mr. Bircham and I thought it was better you should have it from a friend than from common report.’

‘I appreciate the kindness,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow, with something like a laugh ; then she walked to the side of the fire and rang the bell. Mrs. Bircham trembled, but her victim was perfectly

calm ; the assailant looked on in amazed expectation, wondering what was to come next, but the assailed stood quietly waiting till the servant appeared. When the man opened the door, his mistress said : ' Call Mrs. Bircham's carriage, John, and attend her downstairs.'

Mrs. Bircham stood gasping with rage and astonishment. ' Is that all ?' she said ; ' is that all you have got to say ?'

' All—the only reply I will make,' said the lady of the house. She made her visitor a stately bow, with a wave of the hand towards the door. Mrs. Bircham, half mad with baffled rage, looked round as it were for some moral missile to throw before she took her dismissal. She found it in the look of the man who stood impassive at the door. John was a well-trained servant, bound

not to look surprised at anything. Mrs. Bircham clasped her hands together, as if she had made a discovery, made a few hasty steps towards the door, and then turned round with an offensive laugh. 'I suppose that's the man,' she said.

Mrs. Blencarrow stood firm till the door had closed and the sound of her visitor's laugh going downstairs had died away: then she sank down upon her knees in the warm fur of the hearthrug—down—down—covering her face with her hands. She lay there for some time motionless, holding herself together, feeling like something that had suddenly fallen into ruin, her walls all crumbled down, her foundations giving way.

The afternoon had grown dark, and a gray twilight filled the great windows. Nothing but the warm glow of the fire

made any light in the large and luxurious room. It was so full of the comforts and brightness of life—the red light twinkling in the pretty pieces of old silver and curiosities upon the tables, catching in ruddy reflection the picture-frames and mirror, warming and softening the atmosphere which was so sheltered and still; and yet in no monastic cell or prison had there ever been a prostrate figure more like despair.

The first thing that roused her was a soft, caressing touch upon her shoulder; she raised her head to see Emmy, her delicate sixteen-year-old girl, bending over her.

'Mamma, mamma, is anything the matter?' said Emmy.

'I was very tired and chilly; I did not hear you come in, Emmy.'

‘I met Mrs. Bircham on the stairs ; she was laughing all to herself, but when she saw me she began to cry, and said, “Poor Emmy ! poor little girl ! You’ll feel it.” But she would not tell me what it was. And then I find you, mamma, looking miserable.’

‘Am I looking miserable ? You can’t see me, my darling,’ said her mother with a faint laugh. She added, after a pause : ‘Mrs. Bircham has got a new story against one of her neighbours. Don’t let us pay any attention, Emmy ; I never do, you know.’

‘No, mamma,’ said Emmy, with a quaver in her voice. She was very quiet and said very little, but in her half-invalid condition she could not help observing a great many things that eluded other people, and many alarms

and doubts and suppressed suspicions were in her mind which she could not and would not have put in words. There was something in the semi-darkness and in the abandon in which she had found her mother which encouraged Emmy. She clasped Mrs. Blencarrow's arm in both of hers, and put her face against her mother's dress.

'Oh, mamma,' she said, 'if you are troubled about anything, won't you tell me? Oh, mamma, tell me! I should be less unhappy if I knew.'

'Are you unhappy, Emmy? — about me?'

'Oh! I did not mean quite that; but you are unhappy sometimes, and how can I help seeing it? I know your every look, and what you mean when you put your hands together—like that, mamma.'

‘Do you, Emmy?’ The mother took her child into her arms with a strong pressure, as if Emmy’s feeble innocence pressed against her own strong, struggling bosom did her good. The girl felt the quiver in her mother’s arm, which enfolded her, and felt the heavy beating of the heart against which she was pressed, with awe and painful sympathy, but without suspicion. She knew everything without knowing anything in her boundless sympathy and love. But just then the clock upon the mantelpiece tingled out its silvery chime. Five o’clock! Mrs. Blencarrow put Emmy out of her arms with a sudden start. ‘I did not think it was so late. I have to see some one downstairs at five o’clock.’

‘Oh, mamma, wait for some tea; it is just coming.’

'You are very late,' said Mrs. Blencarrow to the butler, who came in carrying a lamp, while John followed him with the tray. Tea in the afternoon was a very novel invention, at that time known only in a few houses. 'Do not be so late another day. I must go, Emmy—it is business; but I shall be back almost directly.'

'Oh, mamma, I hate business; you say you will be back directly, and you don't come for hours !'

Mrs. Blencarrow kissed her daughter and smiled at her, patting her on the shoulder.

'Business, you know, must be attended to,' she said, 'though everything else should go to the wall.'

Her face changed as she turned away; she gave a glance as she passed at the face

of the man who held open the door for her, and it seemed to Mrs. Blencarrow that there was a gleam of knowledge in it, a suppressed disrespect. She was aware, even while this idea framed itself in her mind, that it was a purely fantastic idea, but the profound self-consciousness in her own soul tinged everything she saw ; she hurried downstairs with a sort of reluctant swiftness, a longing to escape and yet an eagerness to go.

CHAPTER VI.

‘ IS IT TRUE ?’

A FEW days passed without any further incident. Mrs. Blencarrow's appearance in the meantime had changed in a singular way. Her wonderful self-command was shaken ; sometimes she had an air of suppressed excitement, a permanent flush under her eyes, a nervous irritation almost uncontrollable ; at other moments she was perfectly pale and composed, but full of an acute consciousness of every sound. She spent a great part of her time in her business-room downstairs, going and coming on many occa-

sions hurriedly, as if by an impulse she could not resist. This could not be hidden from those keen observers, the servants, who all kept up a watch upon her, quickened by whispers that began to reach them from without. Mrs. Blencarrow, on her side, realized very well what must be going on without. She divined the swiftness with which Mrs. Bircham's information would circulate through the county, and the effect it would produce. Whether it was false or true would make no difference at first. There would be the same wave of discussion, of wonder, of doubt; her whole life would be investigated to see what were the likelihoods on either side, and her recent acts and looks and words all talked over. She was a very proud woman, and her sensations were something like those of a

civilized man who is tied to a stake and sees the savages dancing round him, preparing to begin the torture. She expected every moment to see the dart whirl through the air, to feel it quiver in her flesh ; the waiting at the beginning, anticipating the first missile, must be, she thought, the worst of all.

She watched for the first sound of the tempest, and Emmy and the servants watched her, the one with sympathy and terror, the others with keen curiosity not unheightened by expectation. She was a good mistress, and some of them were fond of her ; some of them were capable of standing by her through good and evil ; but it is not in human nature not to watch with excitement the bursting of such a cloud, or to look on without a certain keen pleasure in seeing how a

victim—a heroine—will comport herself in the moment of danger. It was to them as good as a play. There were some in her own house who did not believe it; there were some who had long, they said, been suspicious; but all, both those who believed it and those who did not believe it, were keen to see how she would comport herself in this terrible crisis of fate.

The days went by very slowly in this extraordinary tension of spirit; the first stroke came as such a stroke generally does—from a wholly unexpected quarter. Mrs. Blencarrow was sitting one afternoon with Emmy in the drawing-room. The large room looked larger with only these two in it. Emmy, a little figure only half visible, lay in a great chair near the fire, buried in it, her small face show-

ing like a point of whiteness amid the ruddy tones of the firelight and the crimson of the chair. Her mother was on the other side of the fire, with a screen thrown between her and the glow, scarcely betraying her existence at all, in the shade in which she sat, by any movement. The folds of her velvet dress caught the firelight and showed a little colour lying coiled about her feet; but this was all that a spectator would have seen. Emmy was busy with some fleecy white knitting, which she could go on with in the partial darkness; the faint sound of her knitting-pins was audible along with the occasional puff of flame from the fire, or falling of ashes on the hearth. There was not much conversation between them. Sometimes Emmy would ask a question: 'When are the

boys coming home, mamma?' 'Perhaps to-day,' with a faint movement in the darkness; 'but they are going back to school on Monday,' Mrs. Blencarrow said, with a tone of relief. It might have been imagined that she said 'Thank Heaven!' under her breath. Emmy felt the meaning of that tone as she felt everything, but blamed herself for thinking so, as if she were doing wrong.

'It is a strange thing to say,' said Mrs. Blencarrow; 'but I almost wish they were going straight back to school, without coming home again.'

'Oh, mamma!' said Emmy, with a natural protest.

'It seems a strange thing,' said Mrs. Blencarrow, 'to say——' She had paused between these two last words, and there was a slight quiver in her voice.

She had paused to listen ; there was some sound in the clear air, which was once more hard with frost ; it was the sound of a carriage coming up the avenue. All was so still around the house that they could hear it for a long way. Mrs. Blencarrow drew a long, shivering breath.

‘ There’s somebody coming,’ said Emmy ;
‘ can it be Rex and Bertie ?’

‘ Most likely only somebody coming to call. Emmy !’

‘ What, mamma ?’

‘ I was going to say, don’t stay in the room if—if it were. But no, never mind ; it was a mistake ; I would rather you did stay.’

‘ I will do whatever you please, mamma.’

‘ Thank you, Emmy. If I turn to you, go. But perhaps there will be no need.’

They waited, falling into a curious silence, full of expectation ; the carriage came slowly up to the door ; it jingled and jogged, so that they recognised instinctively that it must be the fly from the station.

‘It will be the boys, after all,’ Mrs. Blencarrow said, with something between relief and annoyance. ‘No,’ she added, with a little impatience ; ‘don’t run to the door to meet them. It is too cold for you ; stay where you are ; I can’t have you exposing yourself.’

Something of the irritability of nervous expectation was in her voice, and presently the door opened, but not with the rush of the boys’ return. It was opened by the butler, who came in solemnly, his white shirt shining out in the twilight of the room, and announced in his grandest tone,

'Colonel and Mr. d'Eyncourt,' as two dark figures followed him into the room. Mrs. Blencarrow rose to her feet with a low cry. She put her hand unconsciously upon her heart, which leaped into the wildest beating.

'You !' she said.

They came forward, one following the other, into the circle of the firelight, and took her hand and kissed her with solemnity. Colonel d'Eyncourt was a tall, slim, soldierly man, the other shorter and rotund. But there was something in the gravity of their entrance which told that their errand was of no usual kind. When Emmy came forward to greet her uncles, they turned to her with a mixture of impatience and commiseration.

'Are you here, my poor child?' said one ; and the other told her to run away,

as they had something particular to say to her mamma.

The butler in the meantime was lighting the candles on the mantelpiece, which made a sudden blaze and brought the two gentlemen into sight.

‘I am sorry I did not know you were coming,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow, recovering her fortitude with the sudden gleam of the light, ‘or I should have sent for you to the station. Preston, bring some tea.’

‘No tea for us,’ said Mr. d’Eyncourt; ‘we have come to see you on family business, if you could give us an hour undisturbed.’

‘Don’t bring any tea, then, Preston,’ she said with a smile, ‘and don’t admit anyone.’ She turned and looked at Emmy, whose eyes were fixed on her. ‘Go and look out for the boys, my dear.’

The two brothers exchanged glances—they were, perhaps, not men of great penetration—they considered that their sister's demeanour was one of perfect calm; and she felt as if she were being suffocated, as she waited with a smile on her face till her daughter and the footman, who was more deliberate, were gone. Then she sat down again on her low chair behind the screen, which sheltered her a little from the glare of the candles as well as the fire.

'I hope,' she said, 'it is nothing of a disagreeable kind—you both look so grave.'

'You must know what we have come to talk about, Joan.'

'Indeed I don't,' she said; 'what is it? There is something the matter. Reginald—Roger—what is it? You frighten

me with your grave faces — what has happened ?’

The gentlemen looked at each other again ; their eyes said, ‘It cannot be true.’ The Colonel cleared his voice ; he was the eldest, and it was upon him that the special burden lay.

‘If it is true,’ he said—‘you know best, Joan, whether it is true or not—if it is true, it is the most dreadful thing that has happened in our family.’

‘You frighten me more and more,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow. ‘Something about John?’

John was the black sheep of the D’Eyncourt family. Again the brothers looked at each other.

‘You must be aware of the rumour that is filling the county,’ said the younger brother. ‘I hear there is nothing else talked of, Joan. It is about you—you,

whom we have always been so proud of. Both Reginald and I have got letters. They say that you have made a disgraceful marriage ; that it's been going on for years ; that you've no right to your present name at all, nor to your position in this house. I cannot tell you the half of what's said. The first letter we paid no attention to, but when we heard it from half a dozen different places — Joan — nothing about John could be half so bad as a story like this about you.'

Mrs. Blencarrow had risen slowly to her feet, but still was in the shade. She did not seem able to resist the impulse to stand up while she was being accused.

'So this is the reason of your sudden visit,' she said, speaking with deliberation, which might have meant either inability

to speak, or the utmost contempt of the cause.

‘What could we have done else?’ they both cried together, apologetic for the first moment. ‘We, your brothers, with such a circumstantial story,’ said the Colonel.

‘And your nearest friends, Joan; to nobody could it be of so much importance as to us,’ said the other.

‘Us!’ she said; ‘it is of more importance to the children.’

‘My dear girl,’ said the Colonel, putting his hand on her shoulder, ‘I am most thankful we did not trust to letters, but came. It’s enough to look at you. You must give us your authority, and we will soon make an end of these slanderers. By Jove! in the old days it would have been pistols that would have done it.’

‘You can’t use pistols to women,’ said

Mr. d'Eyncourt, 'if you were the greatest fire-eater that ever was.'

They both laughed a little at this, but the soul was taken out of the laugh by the perception slowly dawning upon both that Mrs. Blencarrow had said nothing, did not join either in their laugh or their thankfulness for having come, and had, indeed, slightly shrunk from her brother's hand, and still stood without asking them to sit down.

'I'm afraid you are angry with us,' said Roger d'Eyncourt, 'for having hurried here as if we believed it. But there never is any certainty in such matters. We thought it better to settle it at once—at the fountain-head.'

'Yes,' she said, but no more.

The brothers looked at each other again, this time uneasily.

‘My dear Joan,’ said the Colonel—but he did not know how to go on.

‘The fact is,’ said Mr. d’Eyncourt, ‘that you must give us your authority to contradict it, don’t you know—to say authoritatively that there is not a shadow of truth——’

‘Won’t you sit down?’ said Mrs. Blencarrow.

‘Eh? Ah! Oh yes,’ said both men together. They thought for a moment that she was giving them her ‘authority,’ as they said. The Colonel rolled an easy chair near to her. Roger d’Eyncourt stood up against the glow of the fire.

‘Of course, that is all we want—your word,’ said the Colonel.

She was still standing, and seemed to be towering above him where he sat in that low chair; and there was a dumb

resistance in her attitude which made a strange impression upon the two men. She said, after a moment, moistening her lips painfully, 'You seem to have taken the word of other people against me easily enough.'

'Not easily; oh no! with great distress and pain. And we did not take it,' said the younger brother; 'we came at once, to hear your own——'

He stopped, and there was a dead silence. The Colonel sat bending forward into the comparative gloom in which she stood, and Roger d'Eyncourt turned to her in an attitude of anxious attention; but she made no further reply.

'Joan, for God's sake say something! Don't you see that pride is out of the question in such circumstances? We must have a distinct contradiction.

Heavens ! here's someone coming, after all.'

There was a slight impatient tap at the door, and then it was opened quickly, as by someone who had no mind to be put back. They all turned towards the new-comer, the Colonel whirling his chair round with annoyance. It was Brown—Mrs. Blencarrow's agent or steward. He was a tall young man with a well-developed, athletic figure, his head covered with those close curling locks which give an impression of vigour and superabundant life. He came quickly up to Mrs. Blencarrow with some papers in his hand and said something to her, which, in their astonishment and excitement, the brothers did not make out. He had the slow and low enunciation of the North-country, to which their ear was not accustomed. She

answered him with almost painful distinctness.

‘Oh, the papers about Appleby’s lease. Put them on the table, please.’

He went to the table and put them down, turned for a moment undecided, and then joined the group, which watched him with a surprised and hostile curiosity, so far as the brothers were concerned. She turned her face towards him with a fixed, imperious look.

‘I forgot,’ she said hurriedly; ‘I think you have both seen my agent, Mr. Brown.’

Roger d’Eyncourt gave an abrupt nod of recognition; the Colonel only gazed from his chair.

‘I thought Mr. Brown had been your steward, Joan.’

‘He is my—everything that is serviceable and trustworthy,’ she said.

The words seemed to vibrate in the air, so full of meaning were they, and she herself to thrill with some strong sentiment which fixed her look upon this man. He paused a little as if he intended to speak, but after a minute's uncertainty, with a rustic inclination of his head, went slowly away. Mrs. Blencarrow dropped suddenly into her chair as the door closed, as if some tremendous tension had relaxed. The brothers looked wonderingly at each other again. 'That is all very well; the people you employ are in your own hands; but this is of far more consequence.'

'Joan,' said the Colonel, 'I don't know what to think. For God's sake answer one way or another! Why don't you speak? For the sake of your children, for the sake of your own honour, your credit, your family—Is it true?'

‘Hush, Rex! Of course we know it isn’t true. But, Joan, be reasonable, my dear; let’s have your word for it, that we may face the world. Of course we know well enough that you’re the last woman to dishonour Blencarrow’s memory—poor old fellow! who was so fond of you—and deceive everybody.’

‘You seem to have believed me capable of all that, or you would not have come here!’

‘No, Joan, no—not so. Do, for God’s sake, take the right view of it! Tell us simply that you are not married, and have never thought of such a thing, which I for one am sure of to begin with.’

‘Perhaps,’ she said, with a curious hard note of a laugh, ‘they have told you, having told you so much, whom I am supposed to have married, as you say.’

Again they looked at each other. 'No one,' said the Colonel, 'has told us that.'

She laughed again. 'Then if this is all you know, and all I am accused of, to have married no one knows who, no one knows when, you must come to what conclusion you please, and make what discoveries you can. I have nothing to say.'

'Joan!' they both cried.

'You must do exactly what seems good to you,' she said, rising hastily. 'Find out what you can, say what you like—you shall not have a word from me.'

CHAPTER VII.

A NIGHT OF MISERY.

SHE was gone before they could say another word, leaving them looking at each other in consternation, not knowing what to think.

For the rest of the night Mrs. Blencarrow shut herself up in her own room ; she would not come downstairs, not even to dinner. The boys arrived and sought their mother in the drawing-room, wondering that she did not come to meet them, but found only their uncles there, standing before the fire like two baffled conspirators. Reginald and Bertie rushed to their

mother's room, and plunged into it, notwithstanding her maid's exhortation to be quiet.

‘Your mamma has got a bad headache, sir.’

They were not accustomed to any régime of headaches. They burst in and found her seated in her dressing-gown over the fire.

‘Is your head so bad? Are you going to stay out?’ said Reginald, who had just learnt the slang of Eton.

‘And there’s Uncle Rex and Uncle Roger downstairs,’ said Bertie.

‘You must tell them I am not well enough to come down. You must take the head of the table and take care of them instead of me,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow.

‘But what is the matter, mamma?’ said Bertie. ‘You do not look very bad,

though you are red here.' He touched his own cheeks under his eyes, which were shining with the cold and excitement of arriving.

'Never mind, my dear. Emmy and you must do the honours of the house. I am not well enough to come downstairs. Had you good sport?'

'Oh, very good one day; but then, mamma, you know this horrid frost——'

'Yes, yes. I should not wonder if the ice on the pond would bear to-morrow,' she said with a smile. 'Now run away, dear boys, and see that your uncles have everything they want; for I can't bear much talking, you know, with my bad head.'

'Poor mamma!' they cried. Reginald felt her forehead with his cold hand, as he had seen her do, and Bertie hugged her in a somewhat rude embrace. She kissed

both the glowing faces, bright with cold and fun and superabundant life. When they were gone, noisily, yet with sudden starts of recollection that they ought to be quiet, Mrs. Blencarrow got up from her chair and began to walk hurriedly about the room, now and then wringing her hands.

‘Even my little boys!’ she said to herself, with the acutest tone of anguish. ‘Even my little boys!’

For she had no headache, no weakness. Her brain was supernaturally clear, seeing everything on every side of the question. She was before a problem which it needed more than mortal power to solve. To do all her duties was impossible; which was she to fulfil and which abandon? It was not a small contradiction such as sometimes confuses a brain, but one that was

fundamental, striking at the very source of life. She was not angry with her brothers, or with the others who had made this assault upon her. What were they, after all? Had they never spoken a word, the problem would still have been there, more and more difficult to solve every day.

No one disturbed her further that night; she sent word downstairs that she was going to bed, and sent even her maid away, darkening the light. But when all was still, she rose again, and, bringing out a box full of papers, began to examine and read them, burning many—a piece of work which occupied her till the household noises had all sunk into silence, and the chill of midnight was within and around the great house full of human creatures asleep. Mrs. Blencarrow had all the restlessness about her of great mental

trouble. After she had sat long over her papers, she thrust them from her hastily, throwing some into the fire and some into the box, which she locked with a sort of fierce energy ; then rose and moved about the room, pausing to look at herself, with her feverish cheeks, in the great mirror, then throwing herself on her knees by her bedside as if to pray, then rising with a despairing movement as if that was impossible. Sometimes she murmured to herself with a low, unconscious outcry like some wounded animal—sometimes relieved herself by broken words. Her restlessness, her wretchedness, all seemed to breathe that question—the involuntary cry of humanity—‘What shall I do? What shall I do?’ At length she opened her door softly and stole downstairs. There was moonlight outside, and stray

rays from a window here and there made the long corridors and stairs faintly visible. One broad sweep of whiteness from a great window on the staircase crossed the dark like a vast ribbon, and across this ghostly light her figure appeared and passed, more strangely and in a more awful revelation than had all been dark. Had anyone seen her, it would have been impossible to take her for anything but a ghost.

She went down to the hall, then noiselessly along the further passage and bare stone stairs to the little business room. All was dark and silent there, the moonlight coming in through the chinks of the closed shutters. Mrs. Blencarrow stood on the threshold a moment as if she had expected to find someone there, then went in and sat down a few minutes in

the dark. Her movements and her sudden pauses were alike full of the carelessness of distracted action. In the solitude and midnight darkness and silence, what could her troubled thoughts be meditating? Suddenly she moved again unseen, and came out to the door by which tenants and other applicants came for business or charity. She turned the key softly, and, opening it, stood upon the threshold. The opening from the darkness into the white world unseen was like a chill and startling transformation; the white light streamed in, opening a narrow pathway in the darkness, in the midst of which she stood, a ghost indeed—enough to have curdled the blood of any spectator. She stood for another moment between the white world without and the blackness of night and sleep within. To steal away

and be lost for ever in that white still distance ; to disappear and let the billows of light and space and silence swallow her up, and be seen no more. Ah ! but that was not possible. The only thing possible to mortal power was a weary plodding along a weary road, that led not to vague distances, but to some village or town well known, where the fugitive would be discovered by the daylight, by wondering wayfarers, by life which no one can escape. Even should death overtake her, and the welcome chill extinguish existence, yet still there would be found somewhere, like a fallen image, her empty shell, her mortal garment lying in the way of the first passenger. No ; oh no ; rather still the struggle, the contradictions, the despair——

And how could she ask God to help

her?—that one appeal which is instinctive: for there was nothing she could do that would not be full of lies or of treachery, a shirking of one duty or another, the abandonment of justice, truth, and love. She turned from the world outside and closed the door; then returned again up the long stairs, and crossed once more the broad belt of moonlight from the window in the staircase. It was like resigning all hope of outside help, turning back to the struggle that had to be fought out inch by inch on the well-known and common ground. She was chilled to the heart with the icy air of the night, and threw herself down on the hearthrug before the fire, with a forlorn longing for warmth, which is the last physical craving of all wounded and suffering things; and then she fell into a deep but broken sleep,

from which she fortunately picked herself up before daylight, so as to prevent any revelation of her agitated state to the maid, who naturally suspected much, but knew, thanks to Mrs. Blencarrow's miraculous self-command, scarcely anything at all.

She did not get up next morning till the brothers, infinitely perplexed and troubled, believing their sister to be mortally offended by the step they had taken, and by their adoption or partial adoption of the rumours of the neighbourhood, had gone away. They made an ineffectual attempt to see her before they left, and finally departed, sending her a note, in which Roger d'Eyncourt expressed the deep sorrow of both, and their hope that she would come in time to forgive them, and to see that only solici-

tude for herself and her family could have induced them to take such a step.

‘I hope,’ he added, ‘my dear sister, that you will not misunderstand our motives when I say that we are bound in honour to contradict upon authoritative grounds this abominable rumour, since our own character may be called in question, for permitting you to retain the guardianship of the children in such circumstances. As you refuse to discuss it with us (and I understand the natural offence to your pride and modesty that seems involved), we must secure ourselves by examining the books in which the record of the marriage was said to have been found.’

Mrs. Blencarrow received this note while still in bed. She read it with great apparent calm, but the great bed in

which she lay quivered suddenly, all its heavy satin draperies moving as if an earthquake had moved the room. Both her maid and Emmy saw this strange movement with alarmed surprise, thinking that one of the dogs had got in, or that there had been some sinking of the foundation.

‘The bed shook,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow, clutching with her hand at the quilt, as if for safety. ‘Yes, I felt something; but the flooring is not very even, and worm-eaten at some places, you know.’

She got up immediately after, making a pretence of this to account for her recovery so soon after her brothers’ departure, and appeared soon afterwards downstairs, looking very pale and exhausted, but saying she felt a little better. And the day passed as usual—quite as

usual to the boys and the servants; a cheerful day enough, the children in the foreground, and a good deal of holiday noise and commotion going on. Emmy from time to time looked wistfully at her mother, but Mrs. Blencarrow took no notice, save with a kiss or an especially tender word.

‘I think you have got my headache, Emmy.’

‘Oh, mamma, I don’t mind if I can take it from you.’

The mother shook her head with a smile that went to Emmy’s heart.

‘I am afraid,’ she said, ‘no one can do that.’

In the afternoon she sent a man over to the Vicarage, with a note to the clergyman of the parish. He was a middle-aged man, but unmarried; a studious and

quiet parson, little in society, though regarded with great respect in the neighbourhood ; a man safe to confide in, with neither wife nor other belongings to tempt him to the betrayal of a secret entrusted to him. Perhaps this was why, in her uttermost need, Mrs. Blencarrow be-thought herself of Mr. Germaine. She passed the rest of the day in the usual manner, not going out, establishing herself behind the screen by the drawing-room fire with some work, ready to be appealed to by the children. It was the time at which she expected visits, but there had been no caller at Blencarrow for a day or two, which was also a noticeable thing, for the neighbourhood was what is called sociable, and there had been rarely a day in which some country neighbour or other did not appear, until the last week, during

which scarcely any stranger had crossed the threshold. Was it the weather which had become so cold? Was it that there were Christmas parties in most of the houses, which perhaps had not quite broken up yet? Was it——? It was a small matter, and Mrs. Blencarrow was thankful beyond expression to be rid of them, to be free of the necessity for company looks and company talks—but yet——

In the evening, after dinner, when the children were all settled to a noisy round game, she went downstairs to her business room, bidding them good-night before she left, and requesting that she should not be disturbed, for her headaches lately had made her much behind with her work, which, of course, was unusually heavy at the beginning of the year. She went

away with a curious stillness about her, pausing at the door to give a last look at the happy little party, all flushed with their game. It might have been the last look she should ever have of them, from the expression in her face ; and then she closed the door and went resolutely away. The servants in their regions below sounded almost as merry as the children, in the after-dinner ease ; but they were far from the business-room, which was perfectly quiet and empty — a shaded lamp burning in it, the fire blazing. Mrs. Blencarrow sat down at her writing-table, but, though she was so busy, did nothing. She looked at her watch with a weary sigh, then leaning her head on her hands, waited—for whom and for what, who could say ?

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. BLENCARROW'S CONFESSION.

SHE had been there for some time when the sound of a footstep on the gravel outside made her start. It was followed by a knock at the door, which she herself opened almost before the summons. She came back to the room, immediately followed by a tall man in clerical dress. The suppressed excitement which had been in Mrs. Blencarrow's aspect all the day had risen now to an extraordinary height. She was very pale, with one flaring spot on either cheek, and trembled so much that her teeth were with difficulty

kept from chattering against each other. She was quite breathless when she took her seat again, once more supporting her head in her hands.

The clergyman was embarrassed, too ; he clasped and unclasped his hands nervously, and remarked that the night was very cloudy and that it was cold, as if, perhaps, it had been to give her information about the weather that he came. Mr. Germaine giving her his views about the night, and Mrs. Blencarrow listening with her face half hidden, made the most curious picture, surrounded as it was by the bare framework of this out-of-the-way room. She broke in abruptly at last upon the few broken bits of information which he proceeded to give.

‘ Do you guess why I sent for you, Mr. Germaine ?’

The Vicar hesitated, and said, 'I am by no means sure.'

'Or why I receive you here in this strange place, and let you in myself, and treat you as if you were a visitor whom I did not choose to have seen?'

'I have never thought of that last case.'

'No—but it is true enough. It is not an ordinary visit I asked you to pay me.' She took her hands from her face and looked at him for a moment. 'You have heard what people are saying of me?' she said.

'Yes, but I did not believe a word. I felt sure that Kitty only meant to curry favour at home.'

She gave him a strange, sudden look, then paused with a mechanical laugh. 'You think, then,' she said, 'that there

are people in my own county to whom that news would be something to conciliate ; something—something to make them forgive ?’

‘ There are people everywhere who would give much for such a story against a neighbour, Mrs. Blencarrow.’

‘ It is sad that such a thing should be.’ She stopped again, and looked at him once more. ‘ I am going to surprise you very much, Mr. Germaine. You are not like them, so I think I am going to give you a great shock,’ she said.

She had turned her face towards him as she spoke ; the two red spots on her cheeks were like fire, yet her paleness was extreme ; they only seemed to make this the more remarkable.

In the momentary silence the door opened suddenly, and someone came in.

In the subdued light afforded by the shaded lamp it was difficult to see more than that a dark figure had entered the room, and, crossing over to the further side, sat down against the heavy curtains that covered the window. Mrs. Blencarrow made the slightest movement of consciousness, not of surprise, at this interruption, which, indeed, scarcely was an interruption at all, being so instantaneous and so little remarked. She went on :

‘ You have known me a long time ; you will form your own opinion of what I am going to tell you ; I will not excuse or explain.’

‘ Mrs. Blencarrow, I am not sure whether you have perceived that we are not alone.’

She cast a momentary glance at the new-comer, unnecessary, for she was well

aware of him, and of his attitude, and every line of the dark shadow behind her. He sat bending forward, almost double, his elbows upon his knees, and his head in his hands.

‘It makes no difference,’ she said, with a slight impatience—‘no difference. Mr. Germaine, I sent for you to tell you—that it was true.’

‘What!’ he cried. He had scarcely been listening, all his attention being directed with consternation, almost with stupefaction, on the appearance of the man who had come in—who sat there—who made no difference. The words did not strike him at all for the first moment, and then he started and cried in his astonishment, ‘What!’ as if she had struck him a blow.

Mrs. Blencarrow looked at him fixedly

and spoke slowly, being, indeed, forced to do so by a difficulty in enunciating the words. 'The story you have heard is—true.'

The Vicar rose from his chair in the sudden shock and horror; he looked round him like a man stupefied, taking in slowly the whole scene—the woman who was not looking at him, but was gazing straight before her, with those spots of red excitement on her cheeks; the shadow of the man in the background, with face hidden, unsurprised. Mr. Germaine slowly received this astounding, inconceivable thought into his mind.

'Good God!' he cried.

'I make no—explanations—no—excuses. The fact is enough,' she said.

The fact was enough; his mind refused to receive it, yet grasped it with the

force of a catastrophe. He sat down helpless, without a word to say, with a wave of his hands to express his impotence, his incapacity even to think in face of a revelation so astounding and terrible ; and for a full minute there was complete silence ; neither of the three moved or spoke. The calm ticking of the clock took up the tale, as if the room had been vacant — time going on indifferent to all the downfalls and shame of humanity—with now and then a crackle from the glowing fire.

She said at last, being the first, as a woman usually is, to be moved to impatience by the deadly silence, ‘It was not only to tell you—but to ask, what am I to do ?’

‘Mrs. Blencarrow—I have not a word—I—it is incredible.’

‘ Yes,’ she said with a faint smile, ‘ but very true.’ She repeated after another pause, ‘ What am I to do ?’

Mr. Germaine had never in his life been called upon to face such a question. His knowledge of moral problems concerned the more primitive classes of humanity alone, where action is more obvious and the difficulties less great. Nothing like this could occur in a village. He sat and gazed at the woman, who was not a mere victim of passion—a foolish woman who had taken a false step and now had to own to it—but a lady of blameless honour and reputation, proud, full of dignity, the head of a well-known family, the mother of children old enough to understand her downfall and shame, with, so far as he knew, further penalties involved of leaving them, and every habit

of her life, and following the man, whoever he was, into whatsoever wilderness he might seek. The Vicar felt that all the ordinary advice which he would give in such a case was stopped upon his lips. There was no parallel between what was involved here and anything that could occur among the country folk. He sat, feeling the problem beyond him, and without a word to say.

‘I must tell you more,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow. At her high strain of excitement she was scarcely aware that he hesitated to reply, and not at all that he was so much bewildered as to be beyond speech. She went on as if she had not paused at all. ‘A thing has happened — which must often happen ; how can I tell you ? It has been — not happy — for either. We miscalculated — ourselves and all

things. If I am wrong, I am—subject—to contradiction,’ she said, suddenly stopping with a gasp as if for breath.

The shades of the drama grew darker and darker. The spectator listened with unspeakable excitement and curiosity ; there was a silence which seemed to throb with suspense and pain ; but the figure in the background neither moved nor spoke—a large motionless figure, doubled upon itself, the shaggy head held between the hands, the face invisible, the elbows on the knees.

‘ You see ? ’ she said, with a faint movement of her hands, as though calling his attention to that silence. There was a painful flicker of a smile about her lips ; perhaps her pride, perhaps her heart, desired even at this moment a protest. She went on again : ‘ It is—as I say ;

you will see how this—complicates—all that one thinks of—as duty. What am I to do?’

‘Mrs. Blencarrow,’ said the clergyman—then stopped with a painful sense that even this name could be no longer hers, a perception which she divined, and responded to with again a faint, miserable smile—‘what can I say to you?’ he burst out. ‘I don’t know the circumstances; what you tell me is so little. If you are married a second time——’

She made a movement of assent with her hand.

‘Then, of course—it is a commonplace; what else can I say?—your duty to your husband must come first; it must come first. It is the most primitive, the most fundamental law.’

‘What is that duty?’ she said, almost

sharply, looking up ; and again there was a silence.

The clergyman laboured to speak, but what was he to say ? The presence of that motionless figure in the background, had there been nothing else, would have made him dumb.

‘The first thing,’ he said, ‘in ordinary circumstances—Heaven knows I speak in darkness—would be to own your position, at least, and set everything in its right place. Nature itself teaches,’ he continued, growing bolder, ‘that it is impossible to go on living in a false position, acting, if not speaking, what can be nothing but a lie.’

‘It is commonplace, indeed,’ she cried bitterly, ‘all that : who should know it like me ? But will you tell me,’ she said, rising up and sitting down in her excite-

ment, 'that it is my duty to leave my children who want me, and all the work of my life which there is no one else to do, for a useless existence, pleasing no one, needed by no one—a life without an object, or with a hopeless object—a duty I can never fulfil? To leave my trust,' she went on, coming forward to the fire, leaning upon the mantelpiece, and speaking with her face flushed and her voice raised in unconscious eloquence, 'the office I have held for so many years—my children's guardian, their steward, their caretaker—suppose even that I had not been their mother, is a woman bidden to do all that, to make herself useless, to sacrifice what she can do as well as what she is?'

She stopped, words failing her, and stood before him, a wonderful noble figure,

eloquent in every movement and gesture, in the maturity and dignity of her middle age ; then suddenly broke down altogether, and, hiding her face, cried out :

‘ Who am I, to speak so ? Not young to be excused, not a fool to be forgiven ; a woman ashamed—and for no end.’

‘ If you are married,’ said the Vicar, ‘ it is no shame to marry. It may be inappropriate, unsuitable, it may be even regrettable ; but it is not wrong. Do not at least take a morbid view.’

She raised her drooping head, and turned round quickly upon him.

‘ What am I to do ?’ she said. ‘ What am I to do ?’

The Vicar’s eyes stole, in spite of himself, to the other side of the room. The dark shadow there had not moved ; the man still sat with his head bent

between his hands. He gave no evidence that he had heard a word of the discussion ; he put forth no claim except by his presence there.

‘ What can I say?’ said Mr. Germaine. ‘ Nothing but commonplace, nothing but what I have already said. Before everything it is your duty to put things on a right foundation ; you cannot go on like this. It must be painful to do, but it is the only way.’

‘ It is seldom,’ she said, ‘ very seldom that you are so precise.’

‘ Because,’ he said firmly, ‘ there is no doubt on the subject. It is as clear as noonday ; there is but one thing to do.’

Mrs. Blencarrow said nothing ; she stood with a still resistance in her look—a woman whom nothing could overcome,

broken down by circumstances, by trouble, ready to grasp at any expedient; yet unsubdued, and unconvinced that she could not struggle against Fate.

‘I can say nothing else,’ the Vicar repeated, ‘for there is nothing else to say; and perhaps you would prefer that I should go. I can be of no comfort to you, for there is nothing that can be done till this is done—not from my point of view. I can only urge this upon you; I can say nothing different.’

Again Mrs. Blencarrow made no reply. She stood so near him that he could see the heaving of strong passion in all her frame, restrained by her power of self-command, yet beyond that power to conceal. Perhaps she could not speak more; at least, she did not. Mr. Germaine sat between the two, both silent,

absorbed in this all-engrossing question, till he could bear it no longer. He rose abruptly to his feet.

‘May God give you the power to do right!’ he said; ‘I can say no more.’

Mrs. Blencarrow followed him to the door. She opened it for him, and stood outside on the threshold in the moonlight to see him go.

‘At least,’ she said, ‘you will keep my secret; I may trust you with that.’

‘I will say nothing,’ he replied, ‘except to yourself; but think of what I have said.’

‘Think! If thinking would do any good!’

She gave him her hand, in all the veins of which the blood was coursing like a strong stream, and then she closed the door behind him and locked it.

During all this time the man within had never stirred. Would he move? Would he speak? Or could he speak and move? When she went back——

CHAPTER IX.

‘ I AM HER HUSBAND.’

A NIGHT and a day passed after this without any incident. What the chief persons in this strange drama were doing or thinking was hid under an impenetrable veil to all the world. Life at Blencarrow went on as usual. The frost was now keen and the pond was bearing ; the youngsters had forgotten everything except the delight of the ice. Even Emmy had been dragged out, and showed a little colour in her pale cheeks, and a flush of pleasure in her eyes, as she made timid essays in the art of skating, under the

auspices of her brothers. When she proved too timid for much progress, they put her in a chair and drew her carriage from end to end of the pond, growing more and more rosy and bright. Mrs. Blencarrow herself came down in the afternoon to see them at their play, and since the pond at Blencarrow was famed, there was a wonderful gathering of people whom Reginald and Bertie had invited, or who were used to come as soon as it was known that the pond 'was bearing.'

When the lady of the house came on to this cheerful scene, everybody hurried to do her homage. The scandal had not taken root, or else they meant to show her that her neighbours would not turn against her. Perhaps the cessation of visits had been but an accident, such as sometimes happens in those wintry days when nobody

cares to leave home ; or perhaps public opinion, after the first shock of hearing the report against her, had come suddenly round again, as it sometimes does, with an impulse of indignant disbelief. However that might be, she received a triumphant welcome from everybody. To be sure, it was upon her own ground. People said to each other that Mrs. Blencarrow was not looking very strong, but exceedingly handsome and interesting ; her dark velvet and furs suited her ; her eyes were wonderfully clear, almost like the eyes of a child, and exceptionally brilliant ; her colour went and came. She spoke little, but she was very gracious and made the most charming picture, everybody said, with her children about her : Emmy, rosy with unusual excitement and exercise, clinging to her arm, the boys making circles round her.

‘Mamma, come on the chair—we will take you to the end of the pond.’

‘Put mamma on the chair,’ they shouted, laying hold upon her.

She allowed herself to be persuaded, and they flew along, pushing her before them, their animated, glowing faces full of delight, showing over her shoulders.

‘Brown, come and give us a hand with mamma. Brown, just lay hold at this side. Brown! Where’s Brown? Can’t he hear?’ the boys cried.

‘Never mind Brown,’ said Mrs. Blencarrow; ‘I like my boys best.’

‘Ah! but he is such a fellow,’ they exclaimed. ‘He could take you over like lightning. He is far the best skater on the ice. Turn mamma round, Rex, and let her see Brown.’

‘No, my darlings, take me back to the

bank ; I am getting a little giddy,' she said.

But, as they obeyed her, they did not fail to point out the gyrations of Brown, who was certainly, as they said, the best skater on the ice. Mrs. Blencarrow saw him very well—she did not lose the sight—sweeping in wonderful circles about the pond, admired by everybody. He was heavy in repose, but he was a picture of agile strength and knowledge there.

And so the afternoon passed, all calm, bright, tranquil, and, according to every appearance, happy, as it had been for years. A more charming scene could scarcely be, even summer not brighter—the glowing faces lit up with health and that invigorating chill which suits the hardy North ; the red sunset making all the heavens glow in emulation ; the grace-

ful, flying movements of so many lively figures ; the boyish shouts and laughter in the clear air ; the animation of everything. Weakness or trouble do not come out into such places ; there was nothing but pleasure, health, innocent enjoyment, natural satisfaction there. Quite a little crowd stood watching Brown, the steward, as he flew along, making every kind of circle and figure, as if he had been on wings—far the best skater of all, as the boys said. He was still there in the ruddy twilight, when the visitors who had that privilege had streamed into the warm hall for tea, and the nimble skaters had disappeared.

The hall was almost as lively as the pond had been, the red firelight throwing a sort of enchantment over all, rising and falling in fitful flames. Blencarrow had

not been so brilliant since the night of the ball. Several of the young Birchams were there, though not their mother ; and Mrs. Blencarrow had specially, and with a smile of meaning, inquired for Kitty in the hearing of everybody. They all understood her smile, and the inquiry added a thrill of excitement to the delights of the afternoon.

‘The horrid little thing ! How could she invent such a story ?’ people said to each other ; though there were some who whispered in corners that Mrs. Blencarrow was wise, if she could keep it up, to ‘brazen it out.’

Brazen it out ! A woman so dignified, so proud, so self-possessed ; a princess in her way, a queen-mother. As the afternoon went on, her strength failed a little ; she began to breathe more quickly, to change colour instantaneously from red

to pale. Anxiety crept into the clear, too clear eyes. She looked about her by turns with a searching look, as if expecting someone to appear and change everything. When the visitors' carriages came to take them away, the sound of the wheels startled her.

'I thought it might be your uncles coming back,' she said to Emmy, who always watched her with wistful eyes.

Mr. Germaine had gone back to his parsonage through the moonlight with a more troubled mind than he had perhaps ever brought before from any house in his parish. A clergyman has to hear many strange stories, but this, which was in the course of being enacted, and at a crisis so full of excitement, occupied him as no tale of erring husband or wife, or son or daughter going to the bad—such

as are also so common everywhere—had ever done. But the thing which excited him most was the recollection of the silent figure behind, sitting bowed down while the penitent made her confession, listening to everything, but making no sign. The clergyman's interest was all with Mrs. Blencarrow ; he was on her side. To think that she—such a woman—could have got herself into a position like that, seemed incredible, and he felt with an aching sympathy that there was nothing he would not do to get her free—nothing that was not contrary to truth and honour. But, granted that inconceivable first step, her position was one which could be understood ; whereas all his efforts could not make him understand the position of the other—the man who sat there and made no sign. How could

any man sit and hear all that and make no sign?—silent when she made the tragical suggestion that she might be contradicted—motionless when she herself did the servant's part and opened the door to the visitor — giving neither support, nor protest, nor service—taking no share in the whole matter except the silent assertion of his presence there? Mr. Germaine could not forget it; it pre-occupied him more than the image, so much more beautiful and commanding, of the woman in her anguish. What the man could be thinking, what could be his motives, how he could reconcile himself to, or how he could have been brought into, such a strange position, was the subject of all his thoughts. It kept coming uppermost all day; it became a kind of fascination upon him; wherever

he turned his eyes he seemed to see the strange image of that dark figure, with hidden face and shaggy hair pushed about, between his supporting hands.

Just twenty-four hours after that extraordinary interview these thoughts were interrupted by a visitor.

‘A gentleman, sir, wishing to see you.’

It was late for any such visit, but a clergyman is used to being appealed to at all seasons. The visitor came in—a tall man wrapped in a large coat, with the collar up to his ears. It was a cold night, which accounted sufficiently for any amount of covering. Mr. Germaine looked at him in surprise, with a curious sort of recognition of the heavy outline of the man ; but he suddenly brightened as he recognised the stranger and welcomed him cheerfully.

‘ Oh ! it is you, Brown ; come to the fire, and take a chair. Did you ever feel such cold ? ’

Brown sat down, throwing back his coat and revealing his dark countenance, which was cloudy, but handsome, in a rustic, heavy way. The frost was wet and melting on his crisp, curly brown beard ; he had the freshness of the cold on his face, but yet was darkly pale, as was his nature. He made but little response to the Vicar’s cheerful greeting, and drew his chair a little distance away from the blaze of the fire. Mr. Germaine tried to draw him into conversation on ordinary topics, but finding this fail, said, after a pause :

‘ You have brought me, perhaps, a message from Mrs. Blencarrow ? ’

He was disturbed by a sort of presenti-

ment, an uneasy feeling of something coming, for which he could find no cause.

‘No, I have brought no message. I come to you,’ said Brown, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, and his head supported by his hands, ‘on my own account.’

Mr. Germaine uttered a strange cry.

‘Good heavens!’ he said, ‘it was you!’

‘Last night?’ said Brown, looking up at him with his deep-set eyes. ‘Didn’t you know?’

Mr. Germaine could not contain himself. He got up and pushed back his chair. He looked for a moment, being a tall man also and strong, though not so strong as the Hercules before him, as if he would have seized upon him and shaken him, as one dog does another.

‘You!’ he cried. ‘The creature of her

bounty ! For whom she has done everything ! Obligated to her for all you are and all you have !

Brown laughed a low, satirical laugh. ' I am her husband,' he said.

The Vicar stood with rage in his face, gazing at this man, feeling that he could have torn him limb from limb.

' How dared you ?' he said, through his clenched teeth ; ' how dared you ? I should like to kill you. You to sit there and let her appeal to you, and let her open to me and close the door, and do a servant's office, while you were there !'

' What do you mean ?' said Brown. ' I am her husband. She told you so. It's the woman's place in my class to do all that ; why shouldn't she ?'

' I thought,' said the Vicar, ' that however much a man stood by his class, it was

thought best to behave like a gentleman, whatever you were.'

'There you were mistaken,' said Brown. He got up and stood beside Mr. Germaine on the hearth, a tall and powerful figure. 'I am not a gentleman,' he said, 'but I've married a lady. What have I made by it? At first I was a fool. I was pleased whatever she did. But that sort of thing don't last. I've never been anything but Brown the steward, while she was the lady and mistress. How is a man to stand that? I've been hidden out of sight. She's never acknowledged me, never given me my proper place. Brought up to supper at the ball by those two brats of boys, spoken to in a gracious sort of way, "My good Brown." And I her husband—her husband, whom it was her business to obey!'

‘It is a difficult position,’ said Mr. Germaine, averting his eyes.

‘Difficult ! I should think it was difficult, and a false position, as you said. You spoke to her like a man last night ; I’m glad she got it hot for once. By —— ! I am sick and tired of it all.’

‘I hope,’ said the Vicar, not looking at him, ‘that you will not make any sudden exposure, that you will get her consent, that you will respect her feelings. I don’t say that you have not a hard part to play ; but you must think what this exposure will be for her.’

‘Exposure !’ he said. ‘I can’t see what shame there is in being my wife ; naturally I can’t see it. But you need not trouble your head about that. I don’t mean to expose her. I am sick and tired of it all ; I’m going off to begin life anew——’

‘You are going off?’ Mr. Germaine’s heart bounded with sudden relief; he could scarcely believe the man meant what he said.

‘Yes, I’m going off—to Australia. You can go and tell her. Part of the rents have been paid in this week; I have taken them for my expenses.’

He took out a pocket-book, and held it out to the Vicar, who started and laid a sudden hand on his arm.

‘You will not do that—not take money?’ he cried. ‘No, no, that cannot be!’

‘Why not? You may be sure she won’t betray me. I am going for her good and my own; I don’t make any pretence; it’s been a failure all round. I want a wife of my own age and my own kind, not a grand lady who is disgusted

with all my natural ways. A man can't stand that,' he cried, growing darkly red. 'She kept it under at first. But I am not a brute, whatever you think. I have done all I can for her, to save her from what you call the exposure, and I take this money fairly and above-board; you can tell her of it. I wouldn't have chosen even you for a confidant if she hadn't begun. You can go and tell her I sail for Australia from Liverpool to-morrow, and shall never see her more.'

'Brown,' said the Vicar, still with his hand on the other's arm, 'I don't know that I can let you go.'

'You'll be a great fool, then,' Brown said.

The two men stood looking at each other, the one with a smile, half of contempt, half of resolution, the other troubled and uncertain. 'They will say

you have gone off with the money—absconded.'

'She'll take care of that.'

'Brown, are you sure she wishes you to go? The exposure will come, all the same; everything is found out that is true; and she will be left to bear it alone without any support.'

'There will be no exposure,' he said with a short laugh; 'I've seen to that, though you think me no gentleman. There's no need for another word, Mr. Germaine; I've a great respect for you, but I'm not a man that is to be turned from his purpose. You can come and see me off if you please, and make quite sure. I'm due at the station in an hour to catch the up-train. Will you come?—and then you can set her mind quite at ease and say you have seen me go.'

Mr. Germaine looked at his comfortable fire, his cosy room, his book, though he had not been reading, and then at the cold road, the dreary changes of the train, the sleepless night. After a time he said, 'I'll take your offer, Brown. I'll go with you and see you off.'

'If you like, you can give me into custody on the way for going off with Mrs. Blencarrow's money. Mrs. Blencarrow's money? not even that!' he cried, with a laugh of bitterness. 'She is Mrs. Brown; and the money's the boy's, not hers, or else it would be lawfully mine.'

'Brown,' said the Vicar tremulously, 'you are doing a sort of generous act—God help us!—which I can't help consenting to, though it's utterly wrong; but you speak as if you had not a scrap of feeling for her or anyone.'

'I haven't!' he cried fiercely, 'after three years of it. Half the time and more she's been ashamed of me, disgusted with me. Do you think a man can stand that? By ——! I neither can nor will. I'm going,' he continued, buttoning his coat hastily; 'you can come or not, as you please.'

'You had better have some supper first,' said the Vicar.

'Ah! that's the most sensible word you have said,' cried Brown.

Was it bravado, was it bitterness, was it relief in escaping, or the lightness of despair? Mr. Germaine could never tell. It was something of all of these feelings, mingled with the fierce pride of a peasant slighted, and a certain indignant contemptuous generosity to let her go free—the woman who was ashamed of him. All these were in Brown's thoughts.

CHAPTER X.

‘ HE HAS GONE—FOR EVER !’

MRS. BLENCARROW spent that evening with her children ; she made no attempt to leave them after dinner. A lull had come into her heart after the storm. She was aware that it was only temporary, nothing real in it ; but in the midst of a tempest even a few minutes of stillness and tranquillity are dear. She had found on the mantelpiece of the business-room the intimation, ‘ Away on business till Monday,’ and though it perplexed, it also soothed her. And the brothers returning with the proof of

Kitty's statement, the extract which no doubt they would bring from those books to confound her, could now scarcely arrive to-night. A whole evening undisturbed among the children, who might so soon be torn from her, in her own familiar place, which might so soon be hers no longer; an evening like the past, perhaps the last before the coming of that awful future when she must go forth to frame her life anew, loveless and hopeless and ashamed. It was nothing but 'the torrent's smoothness ere it dash below,' the moment of calm before the storm; and yet it was calm, and she was thankful for that one soft moment before the last blow fell.

The children were again lively and happy over their round game; the sober, kind governess—about whom Mrs. Blen-

carrow had already concluded in her own mind that she could secure at least the happiness of the little ones if their mother were forced to leave them—was seated with them, even enjoying the fun, as it is a blessed dispensation of Providence that such good souls often do. Emmy was the only one who was out of it; she was in her favourite corner with a book, and always a watchful glance at her mother. Emmy, with that instinct of the heart which stood her in place of knowledge, had a perception, she could not have told how, of the pause in her mother's soul. She would do nothing to disturb that pause. She sat praying mutely that it might last, that it might be peace coming back. Naturally Emmy, even with all her instinct, did not know the terrible barrier that stood between her mother and peace.

And thus they all sat, apparently in full enjoyment of the sweet household quiet, which by moments was so noisy and full of commotion, the mother seated with the screen between her and the great blazing fire, the children round the table, Emmy with her book.

Mrs. Blencarrow's eyes dwelt upon them with the tenderest, the most pathetic of smiles.

'She looked on sea, and hill, and shore,
As she might never see them more,'

with a throb of tragic wonder rising in her heart how she could ever have thought that this was not enough for her—her children, and her home, and this perfect peace.

It was already late and near their bedtime when the fly from the station drove

up to the door. Mrs. Blencarrow did not hear until some minutes after Emmy had raised her head to listen, and then for a moment longer she would not hear it, persuading herself that it was the wind rising among the trees. When at last it was unmistakable, and the great hall door was heard to open, and even—or so she thought in the sudden shiver of agitation that seized her—a breath of icy wind came in, sweeping through the house, she was for the moment paralyzed with dismay and fear. She said something to hurry the children to bed, to bid them go—go! But she was inaudible even to herself, and did not attempt, nor could indeed form any further thought on any subject, except horror of the catastrophe which she felt to be approaching in this moment of peace. If it had but waited till to-morrow!

Till an hour later, when she should have been alone !

Motionless, holding by her chair, not even hearing the wondering question, 'Who can be coming so late ?' Mrs. Blencarrow, with wide-open eyes fixed on the door, and her under-lip dropping in mortal anguish, awaited her fate.

It was the avengers returning from their search ; her brothers hurrying in one after the other. The Colonel said, 'How delightfully warm !' rubbing his hands. Roger (Roger was always the kindest) came up to her and took her hand. She had risen up to meet them, and grasped with her other hand the only thing she could find to support her—the top of the screen which stood between her and the fire.

‘Joan!’ her brothers began, both speaking together.

She was hoarse, her lips were baked, it was all she could do to articulate.

‘Nothing before the children!’ she said, with a harsh and breathless voice.

‘Joan, this does not matter. We have come to beg your pardon, most humbly, most penitently.’

‘Fact is, it must all have been a mistake——’

‘Say an invention, Reginald.’

‘An invention—a cursed lie of that confounded girl! Hallo!’

There was a sudden crash and fall. The children all rushed to see, and Mrs. Blencarrow stood with the light streaming upon her, and the gilt bar of the screen in her hand. She had crushed it in her agitated grasp; the pretty frame-

work of gilded wood and embroidery lay in a heap at her feet. The sound and shock had brought the blood rushing to her ghastly tragical countenance. She stood looking vaguely at the bar in her hand; but none of the children had any eyes for her—they were all on their knees in a group round the gilded ruin. Save Mr. d'Eyncourt and Emmy, no one noticed the terrible look in her face.

‘Come and sit down here while they pick up the pieces,’ said Roger. ‘Joan, I am afraid you are very angry, and you have reason; that we should have believed such a slander—of all the women in the world—of you! But, my dear, we are heartily ashamed of ourselves, if that is anything.’

‘Most penitent,’ said the Colonel, ‘thoroughly ashamed. I said to Roger,

“If ever there were men who had reason to be proud of their sister——”

‘And yet we gave a moment’s credence to such a barefaced lie!’

She heard them dimly, as from a far distance, and saw them as through a fog; but the voices thus echoing and supplementing each other like a dull chorus gave her time to recover. She said sedately, not with any enthusiasm:

‘I am glad that you have found out—your mistake.’

Oh, heaven! Oh, miserable fate! But it was no mistake.

Mrs. Blencarrow found herself after a time taking Kitty’s defence.

‘She got her own pardon for it. Her mother is a great gossip, and loves a tale against her neighbour. Don’t blame the girl too much.’

‘If you excuse her, Joan, who should say a word? But why in all the world, thinking of an unlikely person to fasten such a slander upon, did she choose you?’

‘Am I so unlikely, when my brothers believed it?’ she said, with a strange smile.

An hour full of commotion followed. The boys never tired in showing each other and everybody else the flaw in the wood where the framework of the screen had broken.

‘But you must have leant on it very heavily, mamma.’

‘She wanted to break our heads with it,’ said the Colonel, who was in high spirits.

‘Fancy mamma breaking Uncle Rex’s head with the screen!’ the children cried with shrieks of laughter; and thus, in a

tumult of amusement and gaiety, the evening closed.

Mrs. Blencarrow went to her room with something cold and hard at her heart like a stone. They had begged her pardon. They had not found that record. By some chance, by some miracle—how could she tell what?—she had escaped detection. But it was true; nothing could alter the fact. Nothing could spirit away *him*—the husband—the man to whom she had bound herself; the owner of her allegiance, of herself, if he chose to exercise his rights. It occurred to her, in the silence of her room, when she was alone there and dared to think, that her present escape was but an additional despair. Had they found it, as they ought to have found it, the worst would have been over. But now, to have the

catastrophe indefinitely postponed — to have it before her every day—the sword hanging over her head, her mind rehearsing day and night what it would be! Would it not be better to go and tell them yet, to have it over? Her hand was on her door to obey this impulse, but her heart failed her. Who could tell? God might be so merciful as to let her die before it was known.

The two gentlemen spent a very merry morning on the ice with the children, and in the afternoon left Blencarrow the best of friends with their sister, grateful to her for her forgiveness. Mrs. Blencarrow did not think it necessary to go out to the pond that afternoon—she was tired, she said—and the skating, which often lasts so short a time that everybody feels it a duty to take advantage of it, had

cleared the house. She spent the afternoon alone, sitting over the fire, cold with misery and anxiety and trouble. Everything seemed right again, and yet nothing was right—nothing. False impressions, false blame, can be resisted ; but who can hold up their head against a scandal that is true ?

It was one of the women servants, in the absence of everybody else, who showed Mr. Germaine into the drawing-room. He was himself very cold and fatigued, having travelled all the previous night, and half the day, returning home. He came to the fire and stood beside her, holding out his hands to the warmth.

‘ You are alone, Mrs. Blencarrow ? ’

‘ Quite alone. You look as if you had something to tell me. For God’s sake what is it ? No news can come to me

but bad news,' she said, rising, standing by him, holding out her hands in piteous appeal.

'I don't know whether you will think it bad news or good. I have come straight from Liverpool, from the deck of a ship which sailed for Australia to-day.'

'What do you mean? What do you mean? A ship—which sailed for Australia?'

'I have come from—Everard Brown. He has thought it best to go away. I have brought you a statement of all the affairs, showing how he has carried with him a certain sum of money. Mrs. Blencarrow, it is too great a shock; let me call someone.'

'No!' She caught at his arm, evidently not knowing what it was upon which she leant. 'No, tell me all—all!'

‘He has taken means—I know not what—to destroy all evidence. He has gone away, never meaning to return. It is all wrong—wrong from beginning to end, the money and everything ; but he had a generous meaning. He wanted to set you free. He has gone—for ever, Mrs. Blencarrow !’

She had fallen at his feet without a word.

People said afterwards that they had thought for some time that Mrs. Blencarrow was not looking well, that she was in a state to take any illness. And there was a flaw in the drains which nobody had discovered till then. She had a long illness, and at one time was despaired of. Things were complicated very much by the fact that Brown, her trusted and confidential agent, had just emigrated to

Australia, a thing he had long set his heart upon, before she fell ill. But her brother, Mr. Roger d'Eyncourt, was happily able to come to Blencarrow and look after everything, and she recovered finally, being a woman with a fine constitution and in the prime of life. The family went abroad as soon as she was well enough to travel, and have remained so, with intervals of London, ever since. When Reginald comes of age, Blencarrow will no doubt be opened once more ; but the care of the estate had evidently become too much for his mother, and it is not thought that she will venture upon such a charge again. It is now in the hands of a regular man of business, which is perhaps better on the whole.

Kitty fell into great and well-deserved disgrace when it was found out that she

had seen what nobody else could see. Walter even, with a man's faculty for abandoning his partner in guilt, declared that he never saw it, that Kitty must have dreamt it, that she tried to make him believe it was Joan Blencarrow when it was only Jane Robinson, and many other people were of opinion that it was all Kitty's cleverness to get herself forgiven and her own runaway match condoned.

That match turned out, like most others, neither perfect happiness nor misery. Perhaps neither husband nor wife could have explained ten years after how it was that they were so idiotic as to think that they could not live without each other ; but they get on together very comfortably, all the same.



THE END.

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